TRIGGER BERG AND THE SACRED PIG

BY LEO EDWARDS

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TRIGGER BERG AND THE SACRED PIG

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"OLD DYNAMITE SUDDENLY DECIDED TO TAKE SIDES WITH US."

Trigger Berg And The Sacred Pig. *Frontispiece (Page 65).*

TRIGGER BERG
AND THE
SACRED PIG

BY

LEO EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF
THE JERRY TODD BOOKS
THE POPPY OTT BOOKS
THE ANDY BLAKE BOOKS

ILLUSTRATED BY

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To

HAROLD DAHLEN

An ideal son, a trustworthy
Scout and a good pal.

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LEO EDWARDS' BOOKS

Here is a complete list of Leo Edwards' published books:

THE JERRY TODD SERIES

Jerry Todd and the Whispering Mummy
Jerry Todd and the Rose-Colored Cat
Jerry Todd and the Oak Island Treasure
Jerry Todd and the Waltzing Hen
Jerry Todd and the Talking Frog
Jerry Todd and the Purring Egg
Jerry Todd in the Whispering Cave
Jerry Todd, Pirate
Jerry Todd and the Bob-Tailed Elephant
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THE POPPY OTT SERIES

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THE TRIGGER BERG SERIES

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Trigger Berg and the Sacred Pig

THE ANDY BLAKE SERIES

Andy Blake
Andy Blake's Comet Coaster
Andy Blake's Secret Service
Andy Blake and the Pot of Gold

THE TUFFY BEAN SERIES

Tuffy Bean's Puppy Days
Tuffy Bean's One-Ring Circus
Tuffy Bean at Funny-Bone Farm

TRIGGER BERG AND THE SACRED PIG

CHAPTER I

SCHOOL DAYS

October 8—Last May, on my birthday, my ma gave me a diary, which, as you probably know, is a book without any printing in it.

Since then I have filled up the blank pages of two separate diaries, having found out that it's a lot of fun to keep a record of the crazy things that I do from day to day.

The diary that I'm starting to-night was sent to me by my rich Uncle Ben who publishes books in New York City. I get all kinds of free books from him. For he likes me. He sends me candy, too. And one time when he went to Florida to see a prize fight (or was it a bathing-beauty contest?) he shipped me a baby alligator. I put it in our bathtub. And there I kept it until my pa accidentally sat down on it one night when the electric lights were on the bum.

Then I discreetly moved it over to Friday's barn, where it later crawled into a rat hole and died.

And now let's see what happened to-day.

First of all school started, after a delay of more than four weeks caused by a loose-jointed basement wall. Naturally the town board *wouldn't* want the Crocketville kids to go back to school when there was danger of the whole building falling in on them! But everything is all hunky-dory now, a crew of masons having been at work there for the past month.

Nor must I forget to mention the stick-pin that Betty Sharpe gave me. Gee! If it's a real diamond, as she kind of let on when she stopped me in the hall during recess and slipped the gift into my hand, I can see, all right, that it's worth a lot of money. For the stone is as big as my pa's toenails.

Betty keeps me guessing. Sometimes I like her and sometimes I hate her. But I like her now! *And* how! I should, after getting such a swell gift from her, which in itself sort of proves how much she likes *me*. Proud of the unexpected gift, and wanting to show it off, I first wore it in my new pink necktie. But I quickly switched it to my hip pocket when the other kids tried to snitch it on me.

I have a new teacher from out of town. Her

name is Miss Squeeze. And if she doesn't get squeezed good and plenty by the twenty-year-old sheiks in this snappy burg before her term is over I miss my guess. For she's as pretty as a picture. She has nice peppy ways, too, and big blue eyes. I like her.

"I'm sure," she spoke with a pleasing little smile, when school had been called, Tail Light, as usual, coming in late, "that we're going to have a very enjoyable and profitable year. For I love children. And I want to help you in every way I can. It isn't always pleasant to study out of dry books. I realize that. So, when you feel restless and your interest lags, we'll put aside our books and have some fun."

After which she wrote down our names.

"Trigger Berg," says I, when she came to me.

"But surely," says she, searching my eyes, "that can't be your real name."

Up went Betty's hand.

"I know his name," she eagerly offered the information, when given permission to speak. "It's Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Berg."

"How very poetic!" smiled the teacher, sort of amused-like.

And did I ever feel like socking somebody! For the kids all snickered at me. Gosh! I've got a swell ma and a swell pa. No boy ever

had a happier home or kinder parents. But they certainly slopped over when they picked out a name for me. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Berg! No wonder I told the teacher that my name was Trigger Berg. And was I ever grateful to her when she wrote it down that way. For she saw, all right, how I felt about it.

Betty again signaled for attention.

"He wrote a book," she informed.

"Yes," came the beaming reply, "I read it."

"It's about a treasure tree," Betty further informed.

The teacher looked kind of lost.

"A treasure tree?" she repeated, sort of tugging at her memory. "Really, I can't recall any such poem as that."

Suffering cats! She thought that Betty was talking about the other Longfellow, never dreaming that *I* was an author, too.

To straighten things out I then got up and explained that I had a rich uncle in the publishing business, who, to please me, had made a book of my first diary.

"And do you mean to tell me," says the teacher, acting surprised, "that your uncle is going to publish a series of these books?"

"Yes, ma'am," came modestly from Crocketville's foremost boy author.

"I'm in the second one," Betty informed her proudly.

Yah, she was in the second one, all right. That is, she *would* be in it if it was published. Remembering some of the stuff that I had written about her, when she and I were on the outs, I wished suddenly that I hadn't been in such a hurry to send the completed diary to my Uncle Ben. But it was out of my reach now. For I had dropped it into the mail box on my way through town.

"You must bring your 'Treasure Tree' book to school," says the teacher, "and I'll read it aloud."

Which was all right with me. But if she ever got the second book, I told myself grimly, wondering, as I peeked at Betty out of the corner of my eyes, if the heavy feeling in my stomach was caused by love or my ma's pancakes, it would be over my dead body.

Afraid that the teacher might get the idea that I was a budding young Shakespeare, or something, and hence expect too much of me, I then explained to her that my diary, as printed in book form, had been entirely rewritten by an experienced author.

"Just the same," I was praised in conclusion, "you deserve a great deal of credit for having written the diary in the first place. Not

many boys would have had the patience to complete such a job. And while your work might not have attracted favorable attention outside of the family, as you say, I deem it a great honor nevertheless to have a boy of your promising capacity in my classes."

After which long-winded speech she asked for more names.

"Robert Burns Beale," piped up Tail Light in turn.

Everybody laughed except the teacher.

"*What?*" she arched her eyebrows, when the squeaky giggles had tapered off. "Are all of the boys in this town named after famous poets?"

"Call him Tail Light," I grinned.

"His name isn't Robert Burns Beale at all," says Betty. "It's Robert *Andrew* Beale. He's just trying to be smart."

"But why do you call him Tail Light?" pressed the curious newcomer, figuring, I guess, that the more she learned about us the easier it would be for her to pound the required lessons into our heads.

"Because I'm bright," Tail Light spoke for himself.

Bright! Suffering cats: If you must know the truth of the matter he's as dumb as a cock-eyed paving brick. The only reason why we

tolerate him in our Comet Coaster club is because he's Slats' kid brother. The youngest one of the bunch, and the slowest, he always tags behind, which is the true reason why we nicknamed him Tail Light. No wonder his classmates hooted at him! Still, that Robert Burns gag of his, coming on top of the other "poetic" stuff, as the teacher called it, wasn't so worse. I could see, all right, that there was hopes for the little squirt after all. He'd learn in time. And how lucky for him, was my added charitable thought, that he had Slats and me to chum around with. He certainly could pick up a lot of clever stuff from us.

Slats, whose real name is John Beale, got special attention from the interested teacher when she learned that he was one of the chief characters in my book. Nor was it hard for her to figure out how he got his nickname. For he's skinnier than a toothless wookpecker. Tail Light, on the other hand, sticks out on all sides like a stuffed pillow. His ma put him on a diet last winter. But the more she fussed over him the fatter he got. So finally she gave up in despair. Nor does she know to this day that the little rubber gullet used to sneak downstairs in the middle of the night, when everybody else was asleep, and drink the cream off the milk bottles, later filling the bottles with water. He

cut it out, though, when Slats and I surprised him one night. And after that, to his ma's great joy, he began to lose weight.

Friday, who has red hair and freckles, was the last member of our club to dish out his name.

"Ronald Fish," says he in turn.

After which, of course, Betty had to separate herself from some more helpful information.

"The boys call him Friday," says she, "because on Friday you always get fish."

"Yah," spoke up Tony Crooker, who hates us, "*Carp* and *suckers.*"

It was during the following recess that I was given the diamond stick-pin. And having found that the safest place for it was in my hip pocket, as I say, I later had the misfortune to sit down on it, point up. Holy mackerel! It was only about two inches long. But it seemed to me, as I delicately extracted it, that it reached clean up to my collar button. Nor did Betty realize why I had such an anguished look on my face as she squinted at me sort of coy-like across the aisle. She had the idea, I guess, that I was trying to sneeze and couldn't.

This noon I doped up the punctured spot with iodine. And then, on the way to school, I socked Tony Crooker for calling me "Poet." We met in the alley. In the fracas that followed I tore

my shirt. But I should worry. He thought that he could wipe up the ground with me, because he's older and bigger. But I'm the quickest. And did he ever squawk when I landed on his beak! Oh, baby!

He lives in another part of town, which explains why I never play with him. Anyway, I wouldn't play with him if he lived next door to me. For he's a sneak. When we organized our Comet Coaster club he tried to bust it up by squirting stinking fish water at us through a knothole in Friday's barn. He thinks it's smart to thus pick on us and smash up our truck. But he usually gets the worst of it in the end.

And now let me tell you what happened this afternoon during penmanship class. Gosh! I thought I'd split. The teacher had her eyes on Tail Light. And when she asked him what he was doing he said that he was writing a letter to his Aunt Emma. "But why do you write so slowly?" says the teacher. "Because," came the brilliant reply, as the gifted speaker artistically, shifted a big cud of chewing gum from one cheek to the other, "my Aunt Emma can't read my writing very fast."

Which, as you can imagine, brought down the school. And now I'm wondering if Tail Light

is even dumber than I thought or a sort of droll wise-cracker.

Oh, yes, a new kid came to school this afternoon. His name is Randall Lewis, and he lives in the old Giblin mansion on the edge of town. But whatever possessed his parents to move into *that* crazy house, with its countless staring windows and crooked turrets is a mystery to me. For everybody in Crocketville knows that the unusual house is haunted. That's why people around here give it a wide berth. The last time I ventured into the neglected yard the weeds were waist high. And did those huge whispering pine trees ever look spooky! Br-r-r-r! They know stuff, all right! But if the new tenants want to rub noses with a bunch of spooks, I should worry. Anyway, the new kid is going to get something worse than a shivery backbone if he tries any more of his googoo-eye stuff on Betty. Having accepted her stick-pin, and suffered for her sake, she's mine. Nor do I propose to let a little squirt like that step in and cut me out.

CHAPTER II

SIDE-SHOW PLANS

October 9—Tony Crooker is getting up a gang, which, he says, is going to make mincemeat out of my gang. I heard about it today at school. He's sore, I guess, because I put a lump on the end of his beak yesterday noon in Whaley's alley. Boy, I wish now that I had socked him harder! And that's what I'll do, too, if he tries any funny business with me. My four-cornered gang can hold its own with any similar gang in town, as Tony will find out to his sorrow if he comes messing around my place.

As this was the regular meeting night of our secret lodge, better known throughout the neighborhood as the Hickory Street Comet Coaster club, we met as usual in Friday's barn, which, with its many wall decorations, consisting mainly of old bones and a stuffed owl, makes a swell lodge room. Mr. Fish got peeved at us one time, as I wrote down in my second diary,

and dumped our nice bones into an old well in the back of the lot. But he's all right now. And having recovered the important decorations, including the four big skulls that we wore the night of Pickles' exciting initiation, our lodge room looks just as swell as ever. We have soap boxes for seats and our altar is an old garbage can that we found in the town dump. The can had a kind of strong smell when we first lugged it home. But it smells all right now. And having painted it red, white and blue, with a gorgeous yellow top, it looks beautiful. Like other lodges we have a Bible on which to do our swearing, only *our* Bible is an old doctor book. But that's all right. The page that the candidate kisses shows a man having his insides cut out. Probably the most impressive part of our secret ceremony is where the candidate kneels at the altar and solemnly kisses the Book. For the picture of the man on the operating table has been touched up beautifully with red ink to make it look like fresh blood. Little things like that help a lot.

As chief officer I called the meeting to order in the regular way, after which Tail Light took up the password.

"Are all those present members of our beloved secret order?" I then inquired in due form.

"Yes, Most Honorable Captain," saluted Tail Light, as he fell over Slats' big feet.

"Very well. Let the Secretary then arise and submit his report."

"Prepare yourself for some bad news," says Friday, getting to his feet.

"Meaning which?" says I, searching his face.

"The treasury," says he, "is empty."

"And what's your recommendation?" says I.

"That we either pay up our back dues," says he, "or rob a bank."

"How about getting up a show?" says Slats.

"What kind of a show?" says I.

"A freak show," says he.

"Make it plainer," says I.

"Everybody knows," says he, "that the freaks in side-shows are fakes. So it will be perfectly all right, I think, if we get up a similar show. We can put it on here in the barn, like we did the pig-catching contest, charging the kids five cents apiece."

Which, we all agreed, as Tail Light coughed up a bug, was a dandy suggestion. And will we ever have fun next Saturday afternoon, which is the date set for the big event. Whoopee! Mrs. Beale has a furniture-decorating outfit, consisting of various stencils and a variety of paint. It does beautiful work. And if we can

use it on Tail Light's bare skin we're going to introduce him as the tattooed sword swallower. In the meantime he has agreed to practice up with a long-handled pancake turner. As manager, Slats is going to wear a checkered vest and his swallow-tailed "Tom Thumb" coat. I'm to be one of the Siamese twins, later taking the part of a Hindu magician. And if everything goes off all right, Friday will head the program as the living half-lady.

To tell the truth, he wasn't very crazy about dressing up like a girl. But he finally consented to the plan, even agreeing to let us use a lip-stick on him, when it was further explained to him that he'd still be a boy from the waist down. Only that part of his body that the audience sees will be dressed up like a girl. With a yellow wig and big earrings he ought to make a swell living half-lady, all right. Nor will his freckles show, for we're going to dope him up with cold cream and face powder.

"All right," says he, giving in. "Go ahead and fix me up to suit yourselves. But for heaven's sake," he rolled his eyes, "don't let Tony Crooker sock me with a rotten egg."

"Don't you worry," waggled Slats, in that confident way of his. "I'll keep my eyes on *that* bird."

"But if you're the manager," says I, kind

of puzzled-like, "and Friday is the living half-lady, who's going to be the other Siamese twin?"

"We might get Betty Sharpe," he considered.

"Haw! haw! haw!" bellowed Friday. "Trigger *would* like to be joined to her with a rubber hose."

"Don't get funny," says I, giving him a mean eye, "or your pa will be putting in an order for a thrifty young tombstone."

"How about the new kid?" Slats then suggested.

"Help yourself," says I, kind of stiff-like.

"What's the matter with him?" came the curious inquiry.

"I just don't like him, that's all."

"I do," piped up Tail Light. "And so does Betty Sharpe. For he gives us gumdrops."

"Do you hear that, Trigger?" laughed Friday, in his tantalizing way.

"Oh, shut up," I fired back at him. And the wonder is that I didn't sock him. For I was good and sore.

Was Betty false to me? I wondered, as Slats and I later walked home together. Still, I told myself, wanting to believe in her, she wouldn't have given me that beautiful stick-pin if she didn't really care for me.

Then came the fatal blow, so to speak.

"Here's a note for you, Trigger," says my ma, when I stopped in the living room where she and my pa were playing some kind of a two-handed card game.

My heart gave a happy bound when I saw who the note was from. And running up stairs to my room this is what I read:

> Dear Mr. Berg:
>
> Will you kindly return my stick-pin, without bending it or loosening the valuable set, as I have *immediate* and *important* use for it.
>
> Respectfully,
> Miss Elizabeth Ruth Alice Sharpe.

In all of her other notes Betty had called me "Dear Trigger," signing herself "Yours devotedly." It was plain to be seen, though, that she now intended to ditch me in favor of the Lewis kid. That's why she had written so stiff-like, signing herself "Miss Elizabeth Ruth Alice Sharpe." And as soon as she got hold of the stick-pin, of course, she'd pass it along to number two.

Gr-r-r-r!

What I intend to do, though, instead of giving up the stick-pin, as she says, is to challenge young Lewis to a duel. I think I can lick him. And if I do she'll still be mine.

October 10—It's all arranged. Young Lewis and I are to fight it out in his back yard tomorrow night after school. I challenged him this morning at recess. He seemed kind of surprised at first. But he didn't back down. Later he picked Slats for a second and I picked Friday. So, as you can see, it's going to be a regular duel. And how proud Betty will be of me when I come riding up to the door of her castle with my rival's scalp dangling from the saddle of my spirited mount.

That's the way the knights of old did it. And that's the way I'd like to do it, too, if I had the necessary stuff, including a tin overcoat and a metal helmet. Still, I shouldn't be too blamed rough with young Lewis. For he seems to be a fairly decent sort of a kid. In fact if he wasn't my rival I think I'd like him. Slats likes him. So does Friday. As for Tail Light, having once been handed a gumdrop, he hangs around the newcomer like a shadow.

I learned, too, that the Lewis kid, an orphan, is a relative of the old geezer who died so mysteriously in the big house that he had built for himself on the edge of town, which explains why the newcomer and his aunt went there to live. Just the two of them, mind you, in that great big house! Br-r-r-r! I'm glad it isn't me. And very probably the kid will have the

house to himself later on. For his aunt is a trained nurse. That's the way she earns a living. And, of course, as soon as she gets a job in Crocketville the kid will have to do his own housekeeping until she is released.

Betty, of course, was mad as hops when I refused to give up the stick-pin. She says she's going to tell my pa on me. But I should worry. Everything will come out all right after the "doodle," as Friday laughingly calls it.

He thinks that it's a big joke. But it's no joke with me. I guess not! Vital things are at stake. Still, I can't expect a fellow like him to understand how I feel about it. For the only thing he ever loved, outside of his parents, is a goofy goat and two pet cats, one of which has the mange.

Until my love affair is settled I don't care whether we have a show or not, as I told Slats to-night after school. He was sore because I wouldn't pitch in and help build a trick cabinet for the living half-lady to perform in. To hear him tell it he's the only one in our gang who ever does any work. He shut up, though, when I asked him if he wanted to buy some more mouse traps. Gosh! That mouse-catching scheme of his sure was a dud. We actually spent fourteen dollars for traps! Seven hundred of them! And how big were our hopes!

But we soon found out that the five hundred homes in Crocketville weren't half as mousy as we had suspected. And thus vanished our dream of making a million dollars apiece.

While I was wiping dishes to-night Tail Light stopped in to show me a sword that he had borrowed from old Charley Robin, the fishmonger.

"Suffering cats!" says I, staring at the long rusted blade. "You surely aren't going to swallow *that!*"

"And why not?" says he.

The goofy little nut!

"I know where I can get another one," says he, flourishing the sword.

"Well, what of it?" I grunted, as I put a neat polish on the inside of a teacup.

"I thought that you and young Lewis might like to know about it."

"Where did you get the idea," says I, reading his thoughts, "that we're going to fight with swords?"

"That's what Betty Sharpe told me."

"Is she worried?" says I quickly.

"Worried?" says he, staring at me. "What do you mean?"

"Well," says I slowly, with an expressive shrug, "something *could* happen to me."

"That's what I told her," he waggled. "But she seems to think it's too good to be true."

"*What?*" I gurgled, blinking at him.

Then as my ma came into the kitchen to feed the canary he lit out for home.

Slats later called me up on the telephone.

"Did you hear Tail Light yelling?" says he.

"What happened?" says I.

"Oh, he got funny and my ma sent him to bed."

"She ought to take him down to the river some day," I grunted, "and sink him in a deep hole."

"Did you see the sword he lugged home?"

"Sure thing."

"My ma almost had a fit when she caught him trying to swallow it. Then he got it stuck. And when my pa finally pried it loose the end of the blade dropped off."

"What caused that?" says I, with quickened interest. "Did Tail Light bite it?"

"No, he accidentally jabbed it into the end of our piano. That's why ma sent him to bed."

CHAPTER III

THE "DOODLE"

October 11—Dreams are a warning. I've found that out. And having dreamt last night that Betty Sharpe was as fat as a corn-fed hippopotamus, with feet to match, you can readily comprehend how eager I was on awakening to get rid of her. Suffering cats! If she's going to look like that when she grows up, she needn't get the simple notion in her head that she can park her four hundred and eighty-five pounds of blubber in the back seat of *my* Ford touring car. I guess not! If I patronize a tent and awning company in later years it will be for tents, not fancy petticoats.

I was a bridegroom in the dream, the most of which took place at the Crocketville depot, where the whole wedding party was waiting for the Honeymoon Express to pull in. Slats was there. So was Friday. And when the new bridge got stuck in the car vestibule they loyally got behind me and helped shove. But she didn't

budge an inch. Pretty soon the engineer got hold of her on the inside. That helped some. But she still was about six feet too broad for the inside car door. The impatient conductor then told me that I'd have to put her in a box car. But I didn't want to go on a honeymoon in a box car. Who would? So I gave another husky shove. Nor was it an imaginary shove, either. For when I woke up I was halfway down the hall with my big dresser. Boy, I was all tuckered out!

"It's all off," I told Friday, on the way to school.

"What?" says he, picking a piece of soap out of his ear.

"The duel," says I.

He thought, I guess, as he further sleuthed his ear for a wash-rag, or something, that I had lost my nerve.

"Are you really going to give her up without a fight?" says he, kind of disappointed-like.

"Why should I fight for her," says I, "when I'm only too glad to get rid of her?"

Betty, of course, had gleefully peddled the news right and left that the new kid and I were going to fight a duel over her. Flutter, flutter little heart! So I was given a lot of curious attention as I slid into my seat, having arrived

at the schoolhouse just in time to escape a tardy mark.

Figuring that I ought to let young Lewis know as soon as possible that the duel had been called off, I wrote him a note, slipping it to him behind the teacher's back. He acted surprised. And I dare say that my beaming face further puzzled him. For earlier I had scowled at him every time our eyes met.

But my efforts to head off the duel were unsuccessful.

"It's too late now to call it off," he wrote back, passing the note to me during arithmetic class, "for the weapons have been made. So I'll expect you to meet me at the appointed place as planned, where we'll fight it out in the customary manner."

Well, I wasn't going to be a quitter. So I hoofed it out of town to-night, accompanied by my pleased second.

"Everybody loves a hero," laughed Friday, when he caught sight of a bunch of girls, who, led by Betty, had assembled at the Methodist church to see us pass.

"Yah," says I, with an uneasy shrug, "and everybody takes a final look at the corpse, too."

"Shucks!" says he, with dancing eyes. "You'll never win if you talk that way. You should try to be optimistic."

"I don't expect to win," says I, sort of dispirited-like. "For I have nothing to fight for now."

"Does Betty know," he grinned, "that your burning love has turned to icicles?"

"She ought to," says I. "For I made a face at her to-day behind the teacher's back."

"You certainly are a changeable guy!"

"If Lewis wants her," says I, "he's welcome to her, as I told him in my note. But having taken a dislike to me he's bound and determined to put his mark on me."

"Who says he dislikes you?" came the quick inquiry.

"His refusal to call off the duel proves it."

"Don't be goofy! He isn't half as crazy over Betty as you think. Besides, I happen to know that he's mighty anxious to make friends with you. For he likes you. That's why he's fighting the duel to-night. He wants to get better acquainted with you."

This aroused my suspicions.

"I bet a cookie," says I, peeking through narrowed eyes, "that you and Slats urged him to go ahead with the duel."

"Sure thing," came the laughing reply.

After which I quickened my steps, as eager to make friends with the new kid as he (according to report) was to make friends with me.

Nor was I a bit concerned over the coming duel. For Friday's continued giggles showed plainly enough that some kind of nonsense had been cooked up.

The rambling, turreted house looked spookier than ever in the late afternoon sunlight. And as Friday and I cut through the cluttered yard I had the shivery feeling that the giant pine trees, so suggestive of a country graveyard, were trying to reach down and nab me with their twitching finger-like limbs.

According to the story that old Charley Robin tells, the crazy house was built by a wealthy butcher named Zeno Giblin. Where he got his money no one knew. One day he was a poor meat-cutter. The next day he was immensely rich. Having built the big house in pattern of pictures that he had seen in a fairy-story book, he lived there for many years, attended by servants and guarded in all of his movements by a huge white pig. The two were a familiar sight in the village streets. It was a strange companionship, old Charley said, and one undoubtedly that had a secret bearing on the retired meat-cutter's earlier life. The butcher and his pig! That's the way the mystified townspeople spoke of the eccentric landowner and his unusual pet. Where had he gotten his sudden wealth? Whatever had pos-

sessed him to built such a crazy, freakish house, the like of which belonged only in fairy tales? Why had he picked out a *pig* for a bodyguard? And, in final, why was a bodyguard needed? That's the kind of stuff that was passed around behind his back. Then one night, without the slightest warning, he disappeared. The servants saw him go to bed as usual. But in the morning the bed was empty. During the night he had been *nabbed* and carried off. Detectives worked on the puzzling case for weeks. They found blood spots. And farmers miles away told of seeing a huge white pig. Had the bodyguard turned killer? Many imaginative people thought so. But the practical detectives scoffed at the idea. No pig, they maintained, could so completely dispose of a human body. During the inquest it was brought out that the wealthy man had recently withdrawn huge sums from the local bank. In fact there was hardly enough money left in the bank to pay the servants. So the big house was closed, its surrounding gardens soon becoming a tangle of weeds and underbrush.

Satisfied that the butcher had been robbed, or, more peculiarly, had voluntarily disappeared, taking his crazy pet with him, the detectives finally abandoned the case and returned to the city. But their practical conclusion left

many things unexplained. And so the imaginative theory grew up in certain sections that the victim's body had been spirited away by some unknown supernatural force, while the faithful pig, in turn, had been frightened away. Some sinister secret of the uncommunicative butcher's had led to his undoing. No wonder the house was haunted! And afraid that its peculiar secrets might be uncovered, the informed sympathetic pine trees had jealously stood guard over the premises throughout the intervening years.

Now the window blinds were down. The weeds had been cut in the path that led from the front door to the sagging gate. There was a spiral of white wood smoke hanging over the big stone chimney. And through an open kitchen window we could hear the homelike warble of a canary.

"Hi!" yipped Friday, as we caught sight of the other duelist and his grinning second under a scraggly apple tree in the back yard.

Meeting me at the edge of the dueling ground, the Lewis kid handed me a big home-made squirt-gun and a rubber coat.

"I trust," says he gravely, "that my selection of weapons, as the challenged party, is entirely satisfactory to you."

A squirt-gun duel! Suffering cats! But I was game. And wrapping the rubber coat around me I took my station beside a bucket of water.

The two seconds then advanced to the center of the field for final parley.

"Has your principal loaded his gun?" says Slats.

"Sure thing," says Friday, trying to act juct as stiff and formal-like as the other.

"Then instruct him to turn his back, in proper dueling style. At the third count he is to wheel and aim at his opponent's head."

"I shall see that he is properly instructed," says Friday, withdrawing.

After which, the count having been given, the duel began. Gosh! I never had so much fun in all my life. The raincoat was intended to protect my clothes. But the blamed thing wouldn't stay buttoned. So I threw it away, later yanking off my shirt and pants. Young Lewis did the same. And soon we were scooting around the October landscape in our birthday suits, first one squawking as he got a dose of cold water in some ticklish spot, and then the other.

"Atta-boy, old kid!" Slats cheered for his side. "You'll have him begging for mercy if you keep that up."

And then, as I got in an equally effective shot, it was Friday's turn to cheer.

"That's the idea, Trigger!" I was praised. "Aim for his mouth—boy, you can't miss it!—and drown him."

"Give him one he'll remember," further yelled Slats.

"Give him one he won't," Friday boomed in turn.

And thus they kept it up until the provided water was exhausted. Randall and I then advanced and shook hands, each trying to outgrin the other. After which, having pledged ourselves to be pals for life, we built a fire and proceeded to dry out our clothes, Slats and Friday in the meantime having gone to the house in search of drinking water.

"I took a liking to you the first time I saw you," Randall told me, sort of warm-like, as we sat beside the roaring fire, the heat of which felt good. "But you acted kind of uppish."

"I was jealous of you," I admitted.

"Being a new kid," he spoke earnestly, "I naturally tried to make all the friends I could. But Betty Sharpe took me too seriously."

"She usually does," I shrugged.

"But I began to back off when she pulled that stick-pin talk on me. For I had no desire to be under obligations to her."

"Then she really promised you the stick-pin?" says I curiously.

"Sure thing," says he.

"Did she tell you I had it?"

"No."

He got up then to put some wood on the fire.

"Slats tells me that you're going to have a show to-morrow afternoon."

"Sure thing," I nodded. "And you can be in it, too, if you want to."

"Aunt Polly said something about me beating rugs. But I'll try and get off at noon."

Then, as we further sat beside the fire, the sun having gone down, he told me about his early life. Born in Chicago, his parents had later moved to Indiana, where word finally reached them of the unclaimed estate in Crocketville, Illinois. A Giblin by birth, Mrs. Lewis consulted a lawyer, instructing him to establish her claim, and that of her unmarried sister, to the vanished butcher's property. But before the arrangements were completed Randall was left an orphan, his unfortunate parents having contracted typhoid fever.

"They got it out of an old well," the story was continued. "And the wonder is that I didn't die, too. But my aunt saved me. Good old Aunt Polly! I love her, Trigger. And

you'll love her, too, when you get acquainted with her. Some people say she talks too much. But that's all right. Her talk is always good talk. Last year we came through here in a car to see what the house was like. Gosh! It was even freakier than we had been told. Nor did I suspect then, as I squinted through the windows, that I'd actually live here. It looked like a witch's house to me, or an ogre's castle. Later Aunt Polly had some hard luck. There was a bank failure. And now this property is all we've got left."

"You ought to start a summer hotel," I laughed.

He gave me a quick searching glance.

"What made you think of that, Trigger?" he inquired.

"Oh," I further laughed, "it just popped into my head."

"It's Aunt Polly's big ambition to turn the house into a sanitarium. I've heard her talk about it. I dare say she'd make a success of it, too, if we possessed the necessary jack. For she's had a lot of experience along that line."

"I know how you can get money," says I.

"How?" says he.

"By solving the mystery of old Zeno's disappearance."

"Then you really believe," says he, searching my eyes, a curious light in his own, "that the old man's money is still here?"

"Sure thing," I waggled.

"But Aunt Polly and I were told that he took the money with him when he skinned out."

"You haven't any proof that he skinned out," I persisted.

"Probably not. But that's the report we got."

"A lot of people *think* he skinned out, for certain unknown reasons. And others think that he was mysteriously robbed and put out of the way. But old Charley Robin, who knew the butcher when he was a poor man, declares that the revengeful spooks got him. And if that's the case, the money's still here."

"I hope you're right, Trigger," a peculiar wistful look accompanied the words.

"I know I'm right," I gave free rein to my imagination.

Yet there was a certain part of my theory, as I then dished it out in detail, which didn't fit. For instance, if the white pig *had* been scared away, as I said, why had it later joined its queer master in haunting the premises? For both (according to report) had been seen in the cluttered front yard, where many a youthful treas-

ure hunt had been staged during the daylight hours.

Upon their return from the well, Slats and Friday joined in the conversation.

"It looks to me," one of them spoke up, "as though the spooks got the pig, too."

"How about the testimony of the farmers," says I, "who saw the pig on the other side of the county?"

"That was another pig."

And there we let the mystery stand, Randall's aunt having called him to supper. He sure is a swell kid, all right. I'm glad we're pals. He'll be a big help, too, if Tony Crooker's new gang tries to clean up on us.

"Oh, yes, I learned the truth to-night about that "diamond" stick-pin of Betty Sharpe's. Huh! She bought it in a dime store. Tail Light, who got heck from old Charley Robin for breaking his sword, told me so. And what I thought was a valuable gem is really nothing more than a hunk of glass with some kind of paste stuck under it, like a mirror.

(Later.) I just got back from Betty's house, where I dropped the stick-pin into her mail box. And will she ever be sore when the returned gift comes to her attention! For I put the price tag on it. Also I wrote a note, in pattern of

her own uppish style, telling her what a big relief it was to me to get rid of the stick-pin, as I wasn't in the habit of wearing *dime-store* jewelry. And I signed myself "Mr. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow William Shakespeare Rudyard Kipling Berg."

Boy, I guess that will hold *her* for awhile!

CHAPTER IV

SPIRIT WITCHES

October 12—My pa woke me up last night at twelve-thirty.

"Get up quick, Trigger," says he, sort of excited-like, as he hurriedly tucked his shirt-tail into his pants.

"What's the matter?" says I, blinking at him.

"There's a big fire down by the river," says he.

I ran to the window, thinking of old Charley Robin, who lives in a dingy, tacky-looking cabin on the river bank. Gee! I surely didn't want *him* to burn up! For he makes the swellest Irish stew that I ever tasted. He lets me eat it out of the kettle, too, which sort of horrifies my ma. But I think it's a great idea. Certainly it saves a lot of dish-washing.

"It's either old Charley's place," says my pa, peeking over my shoulder at the mounting glow, "or the pest house."

The pest house! I certainly wouldn't shed any tears, I told myself, as I jumped into my clothes, if *that* crummy old bug-house burned down.

In our town it's a rule of the public health board, of which Doc Fosse has long been the big noise, that all patients having contagious diseases such as smallpox and the seven-year itch must go to a "detention hospital." That's what Doc and his wordy clique call it. But everybody else in Crocketville has the same name for it that I have. A lonely, isolated building on the river bank, I always hated the sight of it, fearful, I guess, that some day I'd find myself cooped up in one of its buggy rooms. So you can see why I was so willing to kiss the old dump good-by.

Here my ma scooted across the hall with flying shoestrings.

"Hurry up," says she grabbing a coat, "and I'll finish dressing in the car."

Doors were slamming all over the neighborhood. I could hear excited voices, too, and churning automobiles. Then the big fire truck went by the house lickety-cut. Boy! The devil himself couldn't have made more noise.

As we drove out of the yard I caught sight of Friday, who, having hurriedly jumped into his pants hind-side-foremost, had stopped dis-

creetly behind a telephone pole to readjust himself.

"Quick!" says I, as we stopped to pick him up. Then, turning a corner on two wheels, we headed directly for the river.

"Is it old Charley's place?" says Friday, as a tongue of flame lifted itself ahead of us like a huge destructive torch.

"I hope not," says I anxiously.

The air was full of flying sparks. It made me think of a Fourth-of-July celebration. Nor could a hundred kids have made more noise with giant firecrackers. For every driver who had a cut-out was using it. And those who hadn't cut-outs were holding down their horn buttons. That's the way the Crocketville people do when they turn out to a midnight fire. And is it ever fun! Oh, baby!

The cars ahead of us got into a jam. So, like dozens of other people, Friday and I piled out of the back seat and took to our legs, my ma yelling at me to be careful and not get run over. But I knew how to take care of myself. So did my buddy. And then did we ever yip with joy when we came within sight of the burning building into which the volunteer firemen were pouring chemicals by the tubful. For it was indeed the old pest house.

Had the alarm been turned in sooner the

place might have been saved. But it was practically burned down before the firemen got there. Some of the kitchen stuff had been carried out by the fire fighters. But all of the special hospital beds that had been contributed by the various Crocketville societies were burned up. It was a big loss. And I didn't wonder at Doc Fosse tearing his hair (what little he had of it!) when he arrived on the scene in that bustling, blustering, big-eyed way of his. Everybody felt better, though, when the fat newcomer gave out the wheezing information that the building had been closed for the past six weeks, the public health board having decided that it was no longer necessary to keep a regular nurse there. Either the midnight blaze had been started by a defective electric light wire, it was concluded, or trespassing tramps had unintentionally set fire to the place.

Friday insisted that the smoke had a funny smell. It was smallpox germs, he said, and itchers. We did a lot of sniffing. And one old lady, who thought we had a cold, offered us her handkerchief. Then who should waddle into sight but little Tail Light. And how it ever happened I don't know, but for once in his life he wasn't eating.

"What is it?" says he, letting out his neck. "A fire?"

"Naw," says Friday. "They're just warming up the bedbugs."

Told then that there were chemicals in the basement, the people wisely drew back out of harm's way. Nor were they a moment too soon. Following a deep rumbling roar, which stirred up the sparks with added vigor, the huge chimney fell into the ruins with a terrific crash. That was the end of the old dump. House, smallpox germs, itchers and everything else of that nature were gone forever. And wondering what the public health board would do about further possible contagious cases, the people started for home.

There's a well in old Charley's front yard. And when we stopped there to get a drink the owner hobbled to the door with a kind of wild look in his eyes.

"Who is it?" says he, squinting at us in the moonlight.

"Trigger Berg and his gang," says I.

"Um . . ." the speaker dropped his sharp manner. "Bin over to the fire, I s'pose."

"Sure thing," says I, jiggling the pump handle.

"Anybody git burned up?"

"No," says I.

Here the water came with a rush. And did Tail Light ever squawk! For he had his big mouth under the spout. But he soon drained out when we stood him on his head.

Then, as the big fire truck rolled by, with a thunderous roar, old Charley, who wasn't used to stuff like this, looked wilder than ever.

"It wouldn't 'a' happened," says he, sort of panting-like, as he squinted toward the smoking ruins, the excitement having loosened his tongue, "if I had done as ol' Zeno Giblin tol' me. *He* believed in witches. That's whar he got his money. They brung it to him one night in a black trunk. Then, when he tried to double-cross 'em, after buildin' that swell house of his'n, they took him off. No, I don't mean *human* witches. I mean *spirit* witches. Me an' him havin' bin friends fur years, he put that sword over my door. 'It's a talisman,' says he, havin' that very day donated his ol' house to the town fur hospital purposes. 'As long as you keep it thar,' says he, referring to the sword, 'no one kin enter your house to harm you, witches or otherwise.' 'But why should the witches want to harm me?' says I. 'Because,' says he, in that mysterious way of his, 'you're my friend.' 'Mebbe you better keep the sword,' says I, kind of uneasy-like. 'No,' says he, 'you keep it. An'

as long as you have it hung over your door we're both protected.' Then, like a big fool, I took it down yesterday. *That's* why the ol' house was set afire to-night. The witches did it. Zeno lived thar when they brung him the money. An' him havin' turned on 'em they've bin itchin' fur years to do somethin' mean. But until I took that sword down they was helpless. Now, I s'pose, they'll sot fire to *my* place. Or, even worse, they may nab me in my bed an' carry me off, jest like they did him."

Here my pa drove into the yard, telling me sleepily to round up my gang and pile into the back of the car.

"Gosh!" says Friday, as we left the smoking ruins behind us. "I'm glad to get away from that old bird. For he's crazier than a left-handed bedbug."

"*And* how," says I.

"Did you boys know," says my pa, as he jiggled the steering wheel around, "that the pest house used to be Zeno Giblin's old home?"

"Sure thing," says I.

"I've often wondered where the butcher got his money."

"Yes," put in my ma, as she powdered her nose, "and I've often wondered why he built that crazy house."

Then my pa spoke again.

"He and old Charley Robin were thicker than twin peas in a pod. And I've always contended that the old fisherman knew a blamed sight more about the butcher's disappearance than he let on at the time of the inquest."

"Were you here?" says I quickly.

"Nothing else but."

"Was anything said about spirit witches?"

"Spirit witches?" the words were repeated, sort of puzzled-like. "What do you mean?"

And having heard my story my pa was peculiarly thoughtful.

"Some day," says he, as we drove into the garage, "we're going to learn the truth about the butcher's disappearance. For old Charley is rapidly breaking down. He can't hold out much longer. And when he *does* speak, I have the feeling that we're going to hear strange things."

"But what does he mean by spirit witches?" I pressed, peculiarly uneasy.

"Search me. It's one of his crazy notions, I guess."

I couldn't get the thought of the wild-eyed old fisherman out of my head. Could it be, I asked myself, as I got ready for bed, the imaginative side of my mind battling with my good sense, that there really was such a thing as

spirit witches? Did that explain the butcher's sudden wealth and later disappearance? And had the same angry witches set fire to the pest house, as we had been told? Or was that just an old man's crazy notion?

A lot of superstitious people hang horseshoes over their doors for good luck. That's a very common practice. But here was a case of two queer old men hanging a sword over a door to keep out witches. Then one of the men had disappeared. Which sort of proved to my mind that his earlier protective claims for the sword were a lie.

Or had old Charley lied to us to cover up certain sinister secrets of his own?

In all, it was a bewildered tangle, involving a possible crafty robbery and fatal quarrel between two old cronies, one of whom, it was reported, had been enriched by spirit witches. The more I thought about it the scareder I got. So I finally crawled into bed with my ma. After which I soon dropped asleep.

CHAPTER V

READY FOR BUSINESS

October 12 (*Continued*)—A show, such as we were planning to put on, doesn't go off so well on a rainy day. It takes good weather to bring out a crowd. So you can imagine how tickled I was this morning (it was Saturday, you know) when I woke up and found the sun beating in on me as hot as midsummer. Nor did I allow my thoughts to dwell at any great length on the preceding night's events. No, sir-ee! Until I was free, I told myself, as I stripped for a brief sun bath, old Charley and his probable secrets would have to wait.

Later on I'd do a little clever detecting, hopeful, of course, that I'd be able to solve the mystery of the butcher's vanished fortune, thus putting Randall and his aunt on easy street. But just now I was a showman—and a very naked showman at that, as Slats found out when he bounded up the stairs, following a brief exchange of words with my ma.

"Hi," says I, as the noisy newcomer tumbled into the room.

"Of all the lazy bums!" says he, socking me with a pillow.

"Don't forget what the radio says," says I, referring to a well-known beauty talk.

"Meaning which?" says he.

"There's nothing like an early-morning sun bath," says I, "to touch up that schoolgirl complexion."

"Oh, yah?" the speaker made himself look hard. "Well, I'm going to touch you up with something besides a sunbeam if you don't pile out of there and get dressed. For if anybody happens to ask you there's a million jobs waiting for us in Friday's barn."

"Don't make it any more than that," says I, as I reached for my clothes.

"I hear you went to the fire last night."

"Sure thing," says I.

"It's queer I didn't see you there."

"Who were you with?" says I.

"Randall Lewis."

"He's a good kid," says I feelingly.

"*And* how," came the enthusiastic support.

"Did Tail Light tell you what happened last night at old Charley's house?" I quizzed.

"No."

"We stopped there to get a drink, having

noticed a light in the house. And when the old man heard us he came out on the porch with the scaredest pair of eyes that I ever saw. I thought, of course, that the fire had upset him. But pretty soon he began talking about spirit witches."

Slats gave me a curious squinty look.

"What's a spirit witch?" says he.

"That's exactly what I'd like to find out," says I.

"Well," I was urged to continue, "let's hear the rest of it."

"Did you ever notice the sword that hangs over old Charley's front door?" says I.

"Sure thing."

"Well, I found out where he got it last night. It was put there by the butcher who later disappeared so mysteriously. And, if we are to believe old Charley's story, it was put there for a very important reason, too."

"Boy," Slats' eyes danced, "this is interesting!"

"Furthermore," says I, "I found out where the butcher got his money."

"What?" came the amazed cry, as the speaker stared at me.

"The spirit witches brought it to him in a black trunk," says I.

After which I hurriedly dished out the whole

story, including my pa's expressed opinion and my own scattered deductions.

"Randall will be interested in this," was Slats' only comment, when I wound up.

We put in a busy morning in Friday's barn, some of us sawing and others hammering. Boy, it was hot work! And all over town people were complaining about the unseasonable weather. Completing the black-lined cabinet we later tried it out, having dressed up the living half-lady in one of his ma's fancy shirt waists and a yellow wig. Gee! It sure was a peachy trick, all right. Hanging from the top of the cabinet was a white swing. And to the audience it appeared that the exhibited body, as cut off at the waist, was actually resting on the swing-board.

Friday has a goat, as I have mentioned before. But when we tried to put a saddle on him, thinking that we could introduce him as a Brazilian broncho, or something like that, thus adding to the entertainment, he bunted the whole bunch of us out of the barn. Gosh! He's well named Dynamite, all right.

Mrs. Beale has queer ideas. Instead of being proud when we told her that we were going to paint up Tail Light with her chair-decorating outfit and thus introduce him to the audience as the world's biggest-mouthed tattooed sword

swallower, she acted kind of embarrassed. And then, when we tried to argue with her sensible-like, she got peeved. So, to keep peace in the family, we decided to make a mermaid of him. Getting out the old yellow bathtub that we found in the town dump last summer, as written down in an earlier diary, we later built a platform for the tub and filled it with water, after which we did some more rehearsing.

"Aw, shucks!" growled Tail Light, when we tied a bag under his bare arms. "Do I have to wear that crazy thing?"

"Sure thing," says Slats, as he yanked briskly on the string. "It's your tail."

"But I don't want a tail," came the added complaint.

"I've heard you say the same thing about castor oil," says Slats, recalling certain domestic scenes in which his strong-minded ma had taken a leading part, "but I notice that you always get it. So raise your arms and shut up."

"*Ouch!*"

"What's the matter now?"

"It's too tight."

"Do mermaids talk?" put in Friday.

"This one does," the freak spoke for himself, as he wiggled his bare legs in the bag.

"Yah," says Slats, "and eat, too."

"That's a good idea," beamed the mermaid, for whom we had fashioned a wig out of rope.

"Well, don't keep us in suspenders."

"Tell the audience that I'll sing a song for them if they feed me plenty of peanuts."

"If *you* sang a song," says Slats heartlessly, "we wouldn't have an audience."

"I know Old Black Joe."

"How's he getting along?"

"Who?" the speaker stared.

"Old Black Joe."

"It's a song, you big nut."

When we get together there's no end to talk like that. Sometimes it's funny. And sometimes it's silly. But you know how boys are.

We had biscuits and honey for dinner. I ate seven. And then did my ma ever scold me when I accidentally flopped the last one into her lap, sticky side down.

"I think you *better* put on a show," says she, scraping herself, "and work off some of your excess energy tossing juggling balls around."

"Randall Lewis and I are going to be the Siamese twins," says I.

"Have you taken him into your club?"

"Not yet," says I, spearing a pickle. "But we're going to."

"And initiate him?"

"Sure thing," says I.

"Well," says she, giving my pa a sly look, "please let me know when the big initiation comes off and I'll shut your father in the attic for his own self protection. For I haven't forgotten the disastrous circumstances that accompanied your last initiation."

Which was the time that my pa and Friday's pa and Slats' pa hid behind the Grotto of Blood curtain. Nor did we suspect that they were there until we brought Dynamite into the lodge room. Gosh! Getting a whiff of the hiders he went through that curtain as though it was tissue paper. Later the ousted snoopers dragged themselves into Friday's kitchen for repairs, my pa telling the story when he got home that he had a cracked rib.

No wonder he now looked kind of sheepish as he sat in his accustomed place at the head of the table!

"How old is this new chum of yours?" he inquired, when my ma got up to feed the cat.

"Nine," says I.

"Are his parents alive?"

"No," I shook my head. "He's an orphan."

"Who's taking care of him?"

"His aunt," says I.

"Is she rich?"

"No," I again shook my head.

"How does she make a living?" came the further inquiry.

"She's a nurse."

"And you're satisfied," says he in conclusion, "that Randall is the right kind of a boy for you to run around with?"

"Absolutely," I spoke with emphasis.

"I'll be glad to meet him."

"Yes," put in my ma, as she moved the pickle dish out of my reach, "bring him home to supper some night."

"How about his aunt?" says I eagerly. "Shall I invite her, too?"

"I think you better let me call on her first."

"Hot dog!" says I, hoping, of course, that my ma and Randall's aunt would get real chummy. For that would bring us closer together.

Having been shut out of the barn all morning the neighborhood kids were crazy to see what our show was like. So we decided to start the performance at one-thirty instead of two o'clock as planned. Nor was it improbable, we told ourselves gleefully, as the kids kept on coming, that we'd be able to put on two shows, thus doubling our profits.

While we got ready on the inside Slats drummed up business on the outside.

"He sure looks hot," says I, squinting

through a knothole, "in that long-tailed coat of his."

"Is it the one he wore to the Tom Thumb wedding last winter?" says Friday.

"Sure thing," says I. "His ma made it for him out of an old black suit of his pa's."

"When I get bigger," put in Tail Light, "I'm going to wear it to school."

"Yah," says Friday, "*you* would."

Then we listened to hear what the showman was saying about us as he strutted back and forth in front of the closed door.

"First of all, ladies and gents," says he, in regular showman style, "we have Fatima, the half-lady. She lives, friends! She actually lives! As healthy as you or I, yet she has only half a body. She'll talk to you from her cabinet. She'll tell you her interesting history. Her rare beauty will captivate you. And you'll wonder that she can be so happy. But never having had any legs she apparently doesn't miss them. Fatima! Fatima! The world's only living half-lady and one of the greatest beauties of all times."

"He's putting it on pretty thick," says Friday, sort of anxious-like, as I started to work on him with cold cream and face powder.

"The thicker the better," says I.

"But what if the kids see my legs?"

"How can they," says I, "when they're covered up with a black cloth?"

"Just the same," says he, as I painted his lips, "I feel kind of shaky."

When it came his turn to get fixed up Tail Light licked the cold cream off his nose faster than I could put it on.

"Um-yum-yum!" says he, in that hungry way of his.

"Cut it out," says I, giving him a swat.

Then, having tied him in the bag, I flopped him into the tub.

"Br-r-r-r!" says he, parking himself on one end of the tub like a half-frozen walrus.

"What's the matter?" says I.

"The water's co-old."

"It'll be all right," says I, straightening his wig, "when you get used to it."

Slats was still running off at the mouth.

"And concluding this colossal aggregation of world wonders," says he, "is Henrietta, the captivating little mermaid with the darling dimples."

"*Hen*rietta!" snorted Tail Light. "*What* a name! He'll be telling them next, I suppose, that I know how to lay eggs."

"And *can* she dive!" Slats further whooped it up. "Oh, boy! It's worth the price of admission alone just to see her slip gracefully

through the water. You have seen other divers. But until you have seen Henrietta, friends, you have seen nothing."

Tail Light took a look at the tubful of water and shivered.

"I wish I was home," says he miserably.

"You seem to overlook the fact," says I, figuring that he ought to do his part regardless of shivers, "that we're all getting paid for this, yourself included."

"I haven't seen any pay yet," says he.

"Every fifth ticket that we sell," says I, "means a nickel for you. And, of course, every nickel that you earn means that much more to eat."

"Haw! haw! haw!" bellowed Friday, sticking his head out of the cabinet. "I guess you know how to handle him, all right."

"Ease up on the haw-haw-haw stuff," says I quickly. "For you must remember that you're a lady now."

"And do I have to talk like a lady, too?"

"Sure thing."

After which I had two gloomy-acting performers on my hands.

"Boy," Friday rolled his eyes sort of tragic-like, "I bet I never hear the last of this!"

CHAPTER VI

THE BIG BATTLE

October 12 (*Continued*)—There was a babel of voices outside which grew louder and then softer as Randall came hurriedly into the barn, closing the door behind him.

"How are you?" says the tardy newcomer, giving me a look that I liked.

"Fine and dandy," says I.

"I've got something to tell you," says he, in a low voice.

"Yah," says I, thinking of the fire and other connected events, "and I've got something to tell you, too."

Then we turned to see what was going on in the cabinet.

"I was born in the city of Algeria," came a squeaky cracked voice, "of native Algerian parents. My mother was a favorite in the Sultan's palace. Her rare beauty won my father's heart. But he was only a poor plumber. One day the Sultan's bathtub sprung a leak. Hur-

rying to the palace my father repaired the bathtub at the risk of his own life. The Sultan was so deeply impressed by my father's bravery that he offered him the hand of my mother in marriage. In due time I was born. And when my poor mother learned that I had only half a body the shock killed her. Deranged by grief, my father stole six camels, two pipe organs and a Chevrolet. Thrown into prison, he languished there for years. Then one day I was offered a job in a sideshow. Thus I nobly paid my father's debts and got him out of prison. Today he is living a quiet retired life in the city of my birth."

Then Tail Light piped up.

"I was born in—in—"

"Kalamazoo," obligingly supplied the living half-lady, as she powdered her nose.

"It wasn't either Kalamazoo," sputtered Tail Light. "It was Timbuctoo."

"Right you are, my dear *Hen*rietta."

"My mother was a favorite in the Sultan's palace," proceeded Tail Light. "Her rare beauty won my father's heart."

The living half-lady took advantage of the slight pause.

"But he was only a poor plumber," she squeaked.

"One day," Tail Light recited in turn, "the Sultan's bathtub sprung a leak."

After which Fatima glibly swung in again.

"Hurrying to the palace—"

Bang! went the barn door.

"For the love of mud!" yapped Slats, as he faced us, arms akimbo. "Aren't you birds ever going to get ready?"

"We're rehearsing," squeaked the living half-lady.

"The trouble is," says Tail Light, "that I get Fat Emma's stuff all mixed up with my own."

"Hey!" the living half-lady's squeak turned to a threatening squawk. "Lay off that Fat Emma stuff, you knock-kneed little runt, or I'll come over there and kick the spindles out of your back porch."

"How can you," inquired the unruffled mermaid, "when you haven't any legs?"

The cabinet began to rock as its crazy occupant broke into poetry.

"Hey, didle, diddle (Legless, am I?), the cat and the fiddle (Boy, I've got legs to burn!), the cow jumped over the moon (Could I do this if I didn't have legs?); the little dog laughed (You bet I've got legs!) to see such sport (More proof, kid!), and——"

"Stop it!" yelled Slats.

And the funniest of all to me was the dazed look on Randall's face. Gee! He thought he was in a crazy house, I guess.

"Is that Friday?" says he, as the living half-lady stuck out her painted lips for a kiss, getting instead a sharp slap from the indignant showman.

"Nobody else but," says I.

"Gosh! I thought it was a real girl."

"Let's hope," says I, "that the audience will be as easily deceived."

Wonder still lingered in the newcomer's face.

"Who make him up?"

"I did," came the modest admission.

After which I perfected some alterations in my own appearance, it having been agreed that Randall and I, as joined together with a prepared rubber hose (filled with red paint), were to dress like Arabs, with knotted towels on our heads.

I gave my false mustache a final hitch.

"Let her go," says I.

"Thank heaven!" says Slats, as he threw open the door.

Separating themselves from their nickels as fast as they could, the kids crowded into the barn.

"Oh, gee!" one little shaver stopped di-

rectly in front of the cabinet. "Look at the pretty lady."

"Lady me eye," says another kid. "That's Friday Fish. I can tell by his big front teeth."

"But where did he get all that hair? And what became of his legs?"

"Ask him."

Here Slats breezed into sight.

"First of all, friends, permit me to call your attention to Fatima, the world's only living half-lady, who will now entertain you with a brief history of her life."

"I was born in the city of Algeria," the story was begun in a sing-song, high-pitched voice. "My mother was a favorite in the Sultan's palace. Her rare beauty won my father's heart. But he was only a poor plumber."

"My pa's a plumber, too," beamed the little kid.

But the living half-lady refused to be side-tracked.

"One day the Sultan's bathtub sprung a leak. Hurrying to the palace——"

"My pa never hurries."

"Hurrying to the palace," Fatima spoke in a sharper voice, "my father repaired the bath-tub at the risk of his own life. The Sultan was so deeply impressed by my father's bravery——"

"Did he shoot somebody?"

"No," glared Fatima, "but *I* will if you don't shut up."

Then Henrietta put in a bid for attention, the yipping kids having formed into separate groups around the different freaks.

"I was born in Kalamazoo," the life history was begun.

"Timbuctoo," prompted Fatima.

"Shut up," squawked Henrietta. "I guess I know where I was born. It was in Timbuctoo, just as I said."

"Haw! haw! haw!" yipped the audience.

"My mother was a blacksmith."

"A *woman* blacksmith! Haw! haw! haw!"

"I said my father was a blacksmith. One day I fell into the tub beside his forge. And that is where I first learned to swim."

"Did you ever have chilblains?" one of the kids joked.

"Sure thing," came the innocent admission.

"Where? On your tail?"

Henrietta looked silly.

"Deranged by grief," Fatima further held the attention of her own select group, "my father stole six camels, two pipe organs and a Chevrolet."

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared the kids.

"Thrown into prison," the narrator doggedly

stuck to her text, "he languished there for years. Then one day I was offered a job in a sideshow. Thus I nobly paid my father's debts and got him out of prison."

Here the showman directed the general attention of the audience to the wonderful Siamese twins.

"On this platform, friends, you see one of the greatest freaks ever known to the scientific world. The death of either of these remarkable twins would mean the instant death of both, for neither can live without the other. Here is the tube that joins them together, the same blood coursing through both bodies. See! The instant I prick the tube with a needle the blood begins to flow."

"Did you say blood?" a voice inquired.

"Exactly."

"It looks like red paint to me."

After which, of course, there was another general haw-haw.

"And now," says the unruffled showman, "we will draw the curtain on the Siamese twins and introduce Ali Bend Over, the celebrated Hindu magician."

Which, of course, was me. But before I could get ready for my "disappearing-box" trick, as planned, a triumphant malicious shout rang through the barn. And when I peeked

under the curtain, there was Tony Crooker and his new gang. Five of them, mind you, all dressed up like pirates. They were yelling like pirates, too, having taken us by surprise. And every last one of them was armed with rotten apples.

The girls, of course, squealed their heads off as they scooted for cover. Some of them hid in the Grotto of Blood, where Dynamite was taking his afternoon nap. And others disappeared up the hayloft stairs.

Left alone with the armed invaders, we fought it out as best we could. And another such yelling and hooting you never heard in all your born days. The old barn fairly rocked on its foundation.

Not only had the invaders dressed up like pirates, with big brass earrings, black court-plaster patches and colorful head rigs, but they had given themselves appropriate pirate names. The blustering leader was Tony the Terrible. Will Madden, who sits behind me at school and punches me with a ruler, was Bloody Bill. The oldest Madden kid was Toothless Tom. Charley Kavenaugh was Kavey the Killer. And his cousin, George Turner, was Budge the Butcher.

Oh, they were a hard lot, all right! And having surprised us, as described, they tried their

best to lay us out. It looked for a time as though they were going to succeed, too. For we had no ammunition of our own. But many of the rotten apples (thank goodness!) missed the mark. And these were hurled back with telling vengeance. One of the first on our side to get socked was Tail Light, who disappeared with a gurgle into the filled tub. But he soon bobbed to the surface, mad as hops. Off came his tail. In the meantime Friday had separated himself from the incumbering cabinet. Slats already was free. And so, with Randall to help us, we grimly dug in.

To the older boys gathered outside the door this was the best part of the show. And how they laughed as little Tail Light scooted here and there in his wet "shorts." He looked for all the world like a gob of apple butter. But he showed his grit. The oftener he got socked (and were those apples ever squashy!) the harder he fought in return. But the funniest of all was Friday. From the waist up he was a girl. And from the waist down he was a boy. I even laughed at him myself.

My ma scolds me when I fight. So I don't go around looking for trouble. Only tough kids do that. But this was one time when I *had* to fight. If Tony Crooker licked us he'd forever make life miserable for us both in and out of

the school grounds. He's that kind of a kid. And those leagued with him were of the same stamp. Kavey the Killer in particular was a pain in the neck. Boy, it sure was a pleasure to sock *him*! And running out of apples, I grabbed old bones and anything else that I could lay my hands on.

Tony bellowed throughout the battle like a blood-thirsty bull.

"Now, gang, altogether," he roared, trying to talk and act as much like a real pirate as possible. "Grab the first thing that you get your hands on. When you sock 'em, sock 'em for keeps. And for every one that you put to sleep you get an extra bucket of rum to-night when we put to sea."

"Do you hear that, gang?" Slats bellowed at us in turn. "Show 'em that *we* can do a little socking, too."

"There's one for you, Stink-face," Tony further bellowed, as he separated himself from another mushy apple.

"Yah," Slats got in an equally effective shot with an old hoof, "and there's one for you, Skunk-oil."

"We've got you licked already," came the bellowing brag.

"Oh, yah?"

"You heard me say it."

"Listen, Unconscious, you couldn't lick an all-day sucker."

"Tony the Terrible—that's me! I shave with a blowtorch and clean my teeth with a file."

"Oh, we know that you're hard—from the neck up!"

"Yah," says Friday, "solid ivory."

It was an even fight now. Then we slowly got the advantage. And how lovely for us when old Dynamite suddenly decided to take sides with us!

Bing! Struck in the seat of the pants as he bent over to pick up a bone, Kavey the Killer took a complete header through the open door. Which was the last we saw of *him*. Next came Toothless Tom. And I dare say he felt "toothless" (and spineless, too!) when he separated himself from the cinders and rubbish outside of the barn door.

Cornered by the fiery goat, the remainder of the gang began to beg for their lives. And realizing what they would have done to us if they had licked us we made them scoot for the door, one at a time. Tony the Terrible came first. As he scooted dear little Dynamite helped him along. Then came Bloody Bill. And finally Budge the Butcher.

To-night Friday's barn smells like an old cider press. And was Mrs. Fish ever peeved

when she got a peek at her ruined shirt waist, Friday having ripped it up the back in climbing out of the cabinet.

The battle, of course, made a second show impossible. But we should worry. We licked Tony Crooker's new gang. And we took in a dollar and fifty-five cents, which paid our way into the picture show to-night with eighty cents to spare.

It's our plan now to stick together as much as possible. Otherwise Tony Crooker's gang will lay for us and beat us up one at a time. We thought of that to-night after the show, which explains why we all walked home with Randall.

And did those rustling pine trees ever look spooky in the moonlight! Br-r-r! The more I see of them the firmer I'm convinced that they know secret stuff.

Randall has promised to go to Sunday school with me to-morrow. And after that I'm going to eat dinner at his house. I don't mind fooling around out there in the daylight. It's kind of exciting. But I'd hate to live there.

Still, I don't talk that way to him.

(Later.) My ma just got a telephone call from Mrs. Fish. I overheard a lot of stuff about a quilting frame. It seems we sawed it up when we were making Friday's cabinet. Gosh! I hope he doesn't get paddled.

CHAPTER VII

THE PROPOSED PEST HOUSE

October 13—My pa likes to sleep late on Sunday morning. He says he needs the added rest. So you can imagine how peeved he was this morning when I got up at six-thirty to go fishing and accidentally dropped my fishing-tackle box on the stairs. Bumpety-*bumpety*-bumpety-BUMP! That's the way it sounded as the metal box bounded hilariously from step to step. Fishhooks flew in all directions. And, bu-lieve me, I flew, too, when I caught sight of my tousle-headed parent coming down the hall with a razor strap in his hand.

It was a swell morning. Just like yesterday. And wondering how much more of this kind of weather we'd have, I headed for the river, stopping on the way to peek at the ruins of the old pest house. The thick-walled open cellar was cluttered with iron beds, hinges and fallen chimney bricks. I could see a furnace, too, the pipes of which were a wreck, and also several blackened electric-light fixtures.

Old Charley was just starting out with a long cane fishing pole. And figuring that this was just as good a time as any to start quizzing him, I followed him to the dock, where he unlocked a rowboat. He was willing enough to talk as long as I confined the conversation to fish and mosquitoes. But as soon as I broached the subject of spirit witches he shut up like a clam. Nor would he take me with him in the rowboat. So, baiting my hook with a nice fat worm, I parked myself on the town dock. And there I sat for two solid hours while my self-sacrificing worm tried valiantly to attract attention. Disgusted, I finally pulled in my line and started for home, where I found my pa and my ma in their accustomed places in the breakfast nook.

"Goodness gracious!" says my ma, as I draped my stomach around seventeen pancakes (more or less), three yards of bacon and a dozen fried eggs. "If this is a sample of what happens to you when you take an early-morning walk, I'd suggest that you stay in bed hereafter like the rest of us."

"I wasn't walking," says I. "I was fishing."

"Bring anything home?" she inquired.

"Nothing except my appetite," I grinned.

"Are you liable to have another one of these early-morning fishing spasms?" says my pa, kind of sour-like.

"That all depends on the weather," says I.

Certainly, I told myself, as I further twiddled the fried eggs around, it was all wrong to lay in bed on such a swell morning as this.

"Well," says he, "if you *do* feel the compelling urge of the rod and reel next Sunday morning, please put a rubber bumper on that tackle box of yours before you somersault down the stairs."

Usually Slats and I walk to Sunday school together, for we both belong to the same church. But to-day I walked part way with Friday who is a Baptist.

When he and I were younger we used to have some hot arguments about our respective churches. If I said that my church was the tallest he took the stand that his was the broadest. Finally the arguments simmered down to a matter of colored windows and a swimming pool, he maintaining that his church was the best because it had a pool under the pulpit and me insisting as strongly that my church was the best because it had the most colored windows. We even got into a scrap one Sunday morning and I shoved him into a mud puddle in front of Betty Sharpe's house. Gee! And did I ever get a bawling out from Mrs. Sharpe. For Betty, who was standing beside the puddle, afraid, of course, that she'd miss something,

got almost as much mud on her Sunday dress as Friday did on his suit. But to-day, as I've said before, old freckle face and I are the best of pals.

"Get licked?" says I, when he meandered out of the house in his Sunday finery.

"No," says he, coughing up a piece of his toothbrush.

"I thought maybe you would," says I, "after what your ma told my ma over the telephone."

"About the quilting frame?" he grinned, having satisfied himself, I guess, that the balance of his teeth-cleaning outfit was home on the bath-room shelf.

"Sure thing," says I.

He cocked his head in that impish way of his.

"My ma *was* kind of peeved," he admitted, "when she found out that we had sawed up her quilting frame. But she cooled off when I told her that I'd make her a new one."

"I'll help you," says I quickly.

Then, as we separated, I overtook Tail Light, who as usual had a jawbreaker stuck in the front of his homely mug.

"What did you do?" says I. "Spend your class money for candy?"

"Who wants to know?" was his sassy reply,

as he wallowed the sweet stuff around in his big mouth.

"If you did," says I, "I'm going to squeal on you."

But he didn't let that excite him.

"How do you like my new red necktie?" says he, pushing out his manly bosom.

"*What?*" says I, pretending surprise. "Is that a necktie? I thought you had a bloody nose."

Randall was waiting for me in front of the church. And did my eyes ever light up at sight of him! For he looked like a million dollars in his trim Sunday suit. *My* buddy! I kind of think he understood what was going on in my head as we clasped hands. For it seemed to me that there was an added pressure in his own warm handclasp.

"Did you tell your ma," says he quickly, "that you're going to eat dinner with me?"

"Sure thing." says I.

"I'd like to invite Friday, too," says he, with a thoughtful gesture. "But I'm afraid that Aunt Polly wouldn't like it if I brought too many boys home at once."

Told then that Friday was a Baptist, he laughed.

"What did Mr. Fish say about the rotten apples?"

"Nothing," I shrugged.

"Boy, we sure had fun!"

"*And* how," says I.

The new pupil made a big hit with the Sunday-school teacher. For he knew more about the Bible than any other kid in the class. I wondered at this until he explained to me on the way home that his father used to be a traveling preacher. And before the day was over I learned that God's Book meant a great deal to Aunt Polly, too, good woman that she was and a credit to all of her kind.

I had been itching to tell my new chum about the spirit witches and the black trunk, hopeful, of course, that between us we could solve the mystery and thus recover the vanished fortune.

"Did you know," says I, as we further hoofed it out of town, "that your Uncle Zeno used to live in the old house that burned down last Friday night?"

But instead of answering me he gave me a queer look.

"Is *that* your secret?" says he, penetrating my thoughts.

"Partly," says I.

"And I was going to tell you much the same thing," says he, acting dazed.

"Then you knew about the spirit witches?" says I, peculiarly disappointed.

"Spirit witches?" he repeated, staring.

Which proved that he didn't know so much after all.

"Tell me your secret first," says I, confident, in spite of his odd remark, that I had stuff in store for him that he knew nothing about.

Yet it *was* queer, I told myself, that our secrets both hinged on the pest-house fire. Another case, so to speak, of great minds running in the same channel!

And then did *I* ever get a shock when he told me that his aunt was going to turn her big home into a pest house, having satisfied herself that a regular sanitarium was out of the question.

"In a way," he wound up, as I continued to stare at him, "this pesthouse fire was a godsend to us. For it has opened up a way for us to make a living."

A pest house!

"Do you mean to tell me," says I, "that your aunt is willing to fill up her home with all kinds of contagious germs?"

"Nurses aren't afraid of germs, Trigger."

"But surely," says I, "*you* don't want to live in a house like that."

"And why not?" says he, sort of indifferent-like.

I had a good notion to turn around and go home. For people who could talk that way about deadly germs, I told myself sensibly, weren't to be trusted. And how lovely for me, I shivered, if I got a gob of seven-year itchers in my salad!

Br-r-r-r!

I learned, though, as the talk continued, that the whole proposition, as dished out to me by my enthused companion, was little more than an idea. Possessing a house of the required type, and also the proper training, Aunt Polly was ambitiously confident that the public health board would be only too glad to put her on the pay roll. But that had yet to be decided.

"I suppose you know," I told the young pest-house fan, "what will happen to you if the public health board does approve this idea of your aunt's."

"Just what do you mean by that?" says he, searching my face.

"You'll have to quit school."

"Why so?"

Of all the dumb questions!

"Do you suppose for one instant," says I, "that the Crocketville parents would let their precious offspringers, or whatever you call 'em, sit in the same schoolroom with a boy who had the free run of a pest house?"

"But I wouldn't mix with the patients. I'd have my own rooms."

"All right," says I, with an indifferent shrug, "Go ahead and put up your sign. But take my word for it: When the sign goes up, your school days are over with."

"I guess they can't put me out of school," says he stiffly, "if the public health board says it's all right."

"Let me tell you something about pest houses," says I.

"Well," says he stubbornly, "go ahead and speak your piece."

"People on the outside," says I, "don't care to mix up with the people on the inside. Take my ma for example. Do you suppose for one instant that she'd let me come out here to play with you, or would even let me play in the same school grounds with you, if you had a smallpox case in your house?"

"But remember, Trigger, what a big house we've got. I won't need to come within a block of the patients."

"And let me tell you something more about pest houses," says I patiently, determined, if possible, to bring him to his senses.

"Oh, gosh!" he gave an impatient gesture. "I wish you'd run down."

"Last winter," says I, "a bunch of kids in the

river district were exposed to scarlet fever. And to head off a possible serious epidemic, Doc Fosse ordered the whole caboodle to move into the pest house. The kids weren't sick. And did they ever raise cain! The nurse couldn't manage them at all. Wanting to play ball they used oranges, batting the fruit all over the house. Half of the food that was provided for their use was wasted. And not satisfied with that they took to sneaking out nights when the nurse was asleep. That started something. The local newspapers published an article telling how the public health was being endangered by a group of irresponsible boys. What was needed at the pest house, the editor maintained, was more rigid discipline. So the public health board hired armed guards, who were instructed to see that nobody entered or left the pest house who hadn't the proper authority."

"But why bring up all that truck?"

"The point is," says I, "that if you're going to live in a pest house you've got to stay there. You can't run in and out at your own sweet will."

"All right," came the dogged decision. "If the public health board says I've got to stay there I will. For I'm not going to do anything to upset Aunt Polly's plans."

"I hate to lose you," says I feelingly.

"Yah," says he, in the same warm way, "and I hate to lose you, too. But Aunt Polly and I are up against it, Trigger. We've simply *got* to find a way of earning money."

"But why doesn't your aunt do regular nursing?" says I.

"She would if the Crocketville people would hire her. But they don't even know her."

"Tell her not to be in too much of a hurry," says I. "For my ma is going to call on her. And after that she'll get acquainted fast."

"You're a good kid, Trigger."

"So are you," says I. "That's why I hate to give you up."

"And you're confident," says he, kind of troubled-like, "that I'll have to quit school if the public health board approves Aunt Polly's plan?"

"There's only one way of getting around it," says I.

"How's that?"

"By changing your address to 333 Hickory Street."

"And who lives there?" says he curiously.

"Yours truly," says I.

"Aw, gee!" he acted embarrassed. "Your ma wouldn't want to bother with me."

"Let's ask her," says I eagerly.

"No, Trigger," he shook his head. "I can't

do that. It's mighty kind of you to suggest it. But I'd feel like a deserter if I left Aunt Polly to shift for herself. Anyway, it won't hurt me to skip school for a couple of years. And who knows but what we'll be able to sell the big house in the meantime, or find some other way of earning a living?"

"Yah," says I, "and who knows but what you'll find your uncle's vanished fortune, too?"

"Gee!" his eyes sparkled. "I wish we could."

Here, to my surprise, old Charley Robin stepped out of the bushes and shambled across the road. He was muttering to himself like a crazy man. And as I watched him disappear, a stooped, shabby figure, in the direction of the river flats where he lived, a peculiar disappointment stole over me. Yet I was mystified, too, for the old fisherman carried a spade.

"He's the man," says I, "who told me about the spirit witches and the black trunk."

Randall had stopped dead still in the middle of the road.

"Yes," says he, with a dark face, "and he's the man we caught peeping in our sitting-room window. But if he tries it again he's going to get his block knocked off. For poor Aunt Polly was scared out of her wits."

Old Charley had told us some queer stuff. It had excited us. But I saw now that he was com-

pletely unbalanced. His actions proved it. And that's what disappointed me.

But having promised to tell Randall my story, I dished it out to him in detail. Undoubtedly, I said, old Charley knew the truth about the butcher's disappearance. But I had little faith now in the "spirit-witch" talk, though earlier it had stirred up a lot of imaginative conjectures in my mind.

"I was going to suggest," I wound up, "that we pump old Charley and thus find out what he meant by his queer talk. But I'm convinced now that the only help we can get from him is a confession of his own guilt."

Randall had a queer look on his face.

"Don't be too sure of that, Trigger," says he.

"What do you mean?" says I quickly.

"I never heard of spirit witches. But it sounds a whole lot like spiritualism to me."

Spiritualism!

"Was your Uncle Zeno a spiritualist?" says I excitedly.

"Nothing else but."

And there the conversation ended. For having turned into the tree-hung path that led to the quaint turreted house, we suddenly encountered a little old lady, whose snapping black eyes and tightly-combed gray hair gave her a pleasing, old-fashioned appearance.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

October 31 *(Continued)*—Aunt Polly's personal appearance was a big surprise to me. Having heard so much about her I had pictured her in my mind's eye as an imposing, heavy-set type of woman who had the knack of getting things done in exactly the way she wanted them done. Or, in other words, the "bossy" type. But here was a little bit of a woman whose quick, wiry movements reminded me for all the world of a peppy jumping jack. I doubt if she weighed more than a hundred pounds. Certainly she didn't look it. And I wondered, sort of curious-like, as I shook hands with her, how she could lift big patients in and out of bed as I had seen other nurses do. But I soon found out that she was a bundle of steel wires. And *could* she talk! Oh, mister man!

Randall laughingly linked arms with me.

"This is the boy, Aunt Polly, who challenged

me to fight a doodle because I winked at his best girl. But we're the best of friends now."

"And *what* a doodle!" I laughed in turn, as I squeezed his hand.

"Tut! Tut!" says the little old lady, with a sort of humorous twinkle in her noticeable eyes. "I'm just as much ashamed of that bare-legged escapade as you are. So the less said about it the better. Laws-a-me! Why normal boys care to do such things in the first place is a riddle to me. First it's one nonsensical thing and then another. On the go *all* the time. But boys have been that way since the beginning of time, I dare say, and probably always will be that way. So far be it from me to interfere with the Divine scheme of things. Nor were my own brothers an exception to the general rule. Goodness gracious! *Such* antics! Take my brother Jake for instance. He was forever playing tricks behind the teacher's back. One of the slyest boys I ever knew. But instead of being hung, as a lot of the neighbors predicted, he made a big success of his later life. So did my second brother Harry. But——"

And there she stopped as abruptly as though she had collided with a stone wall.

"What about him?" quizzed Randall, eager, of course, to learn all that he could about the early life of the mysterious meat-cutter.

"I'd prefer not to talk about it."

"Oh, but you must!" came the eager cry. "For how can Trigger and I solve the mystery if you don't help us?"

"Mystery?" repeated the little old lady, as she searched our faces in turn. "What mystery do you mean? Laws-a-me! You haven't got the notion in your heads that there's a ghost around here, have you?"

"Why, the mystery of Uncle Zeno's vanished fortune."

"It's 'vanished,'" came the dry reminder, "because he took it with him."

"That's what the lawyers told you, Aunt Polly. But a lot of people around here, Trigger's father included, think that my uncle was put out of the way."

The old lady didn't like the sound of that.

"Oh, dear!" she cried, wringing her hands, as her nerve deserted her. "I wish I could leave here. For I've had the feeling ever since we moved in that there was something queer about the place. Stale smells. Creaking stairs. Rattling window blinds. Dirt, dirt, dirt everywhere. And the face that we saw at the window hasn't helped matters."

"That was old Charley Robin," says I, little dreaming of the effect that my words would have on her.

"*Who?*" she squealed, acting more terrified than ever.

"Old Charley Robin," I repeated, wondering at her fright.

There was a short deep silence, throughout which I had a queer uneasy feeling that the surrounding pine trees were trembling with suppressed excitement.

"I'm beginning to think," says she slowly, "that there is a great deal more mystery associated with this fatal freakish house and my brother's unsolved disappearance than I suspected. For old Charley Robin, with whom I grew up in Ohio, was the man who converted my erratic brother to spiritualism. *Such* a heathenish belief! Later the two disappeared together, and for years we wondered what had become of them, particularly my brother. It seems though that he came directly to Crocketville, where, after the customary period of apprenticeship, he opened up a meat market, though what there was about the butcher business to appeal to him is more than I can understand. Then came that dramatic chapter in his life which mystified the whole countryside. Almost overnight, as it were, he became immensely wealthy. Where he got his money I haven't the slightest idea. Certainly he didn't inherit it. Nor can I bring myself to believe

that he stole it. Queerness was a known trait of his, as this outlandish house proves. Land of Goshen! A freakier place I never saw in all my born days. Yet, so far as I know, it was never said of him that he was dishonest. In disappearing he left no clue to the source of his mysterious wealth, the bulk of which disappeared with him, thus giving rise to the theory that he had peculiarly abandoned his unusual home. Nor had he made any provision for the distribution of his real estate. My other brothers having passed away, one in the town of his birth and the other in distant Alaska—he went up there to look for gold—the estate naturally fell to my sister and myself, though, until we were notified of the existing estate, we had not the slightest knowledge of our odd brother's whereabouts. Given the facts of the case I wondered at the time, as I nursed that fat woman in Delphi, Indiana, who had the dropsy, if his disappearance had anything to do with his queer religion. And I wondered, too, in coming here, the dropsy patient having been put away in a vault, if he would make good his threat and return from the grave to haunt me. For I got the blame when father told him to change his ways or get out. At times when I am alone in the house I have the horrible feeling that something I cannot see is following me from room to room.

Once I felt the hot breath of an animal on my hand. And the wonder is that I didn't jump out of my skin. Yet when I looked down, with fast-beating heart, nothing was there. My common sense argued that this was all imagination. And having found great relief in prayer, I was hopeful that everything would come out all right. But if Charley Robin has entered the neighborhood, as you say, I shall live in constant fear of my life hereafter. For he's one of the devil's disciples."

"Oh, gee, Aunt Polly!" Randall slipped a strong young arm around the slim waist. "Don't talk that way. I won't let anything harm you. Besides, old Mr. Robin isn't half as bad as you have pictured him. Is he, Trigger?"

And being a true friend of old Charley's I quickly sallied forth to his defense. He was odd, I said. And a lot of people doubted his fish stories. But there was nothing crooked about him. Nor was there a man in town, I wound up, with a burst of enthusiasm, who could hold a candle to him when it came to making Irish stew.

I even forgot that I had earlier suspected the goofy old man of putting his crony out of business. But that was all right. I had other views now.

Poor old Charley! He knew stuff, all right.

His actions proved it. And it was equally apparent that he was breaking down under the strain of his peculiar secrets. But somehow I had the happy feeling that when he did speak up it would be to establish his own innocence as well as to clear up the long-standing mystery.

Certainly, I clinched the arguments in his favor, he hadn't profited any by the meat-cutter's disappearance. For he was as poor as a church mouse.

Which, of course, I told myself with mounting excitement, was conclusive proof that the vanished fortune was still hidden in the house. And confident that I could find it if given the chance to search for it I eagerly followed Aunt Polly down the path, my heart getting in an extra beat as we came within sight of the showy front porch, with its wooden gewgaws and other fancy truck, all of which had been kept beautifully painted in the meat-cutter's day. Now, though, things looked kind of shabby.

Aunt Polly suddenly stopped.

"Why," says she, squinting at the path, "who has been digging here? Look! The dirt has been disturbed."

Instantly I thought of old Charley and his spade. And hopeful now that we had located the vanished fortune, I got down on my knees and dug like a dog. Nor was this difficult. For

the earth was soft. Pretty soon I struck something hard. And grabbing it I pulled it out of the ground.

"Nothing but a broken sword," says Randall, his face showing the disappointment that he felt.

I didn't say anything myself. I couldn't. For this latest mysterious act of old Charley's had completely befuddled me.

He had told us that the sword, as placed over his cabin door by the meat-cutter, was a talisman, put there to keep out evil spirit witches.

But why, I now asked myself, had he buried the same sword in the path leading from the road to the house in which the mystery had its seat?

And, in final, why had he peeped at the newcomers through the sitting-room window?

While Aunt Polly was putting dinner on the table Randall and I took an extended jaunt through the cluttered grounds, hopeful that we'd spot further signs of digging. But old Charley's sole purpose in visiting the premises, it seems, was to bury the broken sword in the path. For no other disturbed spots came to our attention.

Presently we heard Aunt Polly's high-pitched voice calling us to dinner. And *what* a dinner! Um-yum-yum! Baked chicken with dressing,

cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and gravy, celery, pickles, two kinds of bread, and, to top off with, the swellest hot mincemeat pie that I ever buried my teeth in. Randall had told me that he and his aunt were kind of hard up. But it was difficult for me to believe it when I took a look at that loaded dinner table.

Aunt Polly had long ago mastered the art of talking and eating at the same time, though I found myself wondering, as the flow of gab continued, how she ever got time to swallow. If she dished out a line of gab like this to all of her patients, I told myself, as I masterfully attacked a drumstick, it wasn't at all surprising that the Delphi lady had decided to end her career in the family vault. Not that I objected to the almost constant chatter. As a matter of fact I kind of liked it. Certainly I'd rather mix with talkative people than grouches. Besides, Aunt Polly and I had taken a quick shine to each other. I let her see by my actions how *I* felt about it. And the beaming attention that I got in return made me feel good. Gee! She sure was a swell little old lady, all right.

"Now, don't be a bit bashful," says she, forcing another gob of potatoes and gravy on me. "Act just as though you were at home. And if you don't see what you want, ask for it. God put tongues in our heads. And if we don't

make use of them it's our own fault. Certainly I make good use of mine. My sister Clara often told me that I used it too much. Laws-a-me! If I ever see the time that I can't talk—that's it, Trigger, have some more celery—I want to die. People wonder why I never got married. But it isn't because I hadn't the chance. I was engaged for three years. But when my fiancé lost his hearing in a sewer explosion I returned the ring. For what satisfaction would *I* get marrying a deaf man! Of course, I could have learned to talk to him with my fingers. But when I talk I like to talk fast. And in that respect I'm just like my Aunt Kate. The dear old soul! I used to visit her regularly until she got paralysis of the jaw-bone. After that I stayed away. For the helpless look in her eyes as she just sat there and *listened* sickened me. I helped to bury her last winter. And if miracles *are* performed in heaven I hope, with all my heart, that the dear old lady gets her speech back. For think of all the wonderful things she'll have to talk about up there! *Randall!* You shouldn't gurgle that way when you drink. That's it. Pass the chicken to Trigger. And then wipe the gravy off your necktie. No, don't *lick* it. Goodness gracious! Such disgraceful table manners. You make me think of the old man that I took care of in Ashland, Ohio, who,

when I brought him his soup, always complained that it burned the end of his nose.''

And so the talk ran on and on. Once she stopped to fill the teakettle, and it seemed to me that I had lost my hearing.

''I was frightened in the yard,'' she told us, upon her return to the table, having earlier explained that she had walked to the gate to meet us. ''But I'm all over that now. I've asked God to take care of me. And I know that He will. For He never fails those who trust in Him. That is the greatest consolation that life affords. I'm going to fill my heart with songs of praise. And I'm going ahead with my plans just as though nothing happened. For as long as I hold my trust in the Lord I am confident that the demons of the darkness will have no power to harm me. Zeno made his brags that he could talk with the dead. And I've seen him shut himself up in the dark for hours at a time. It was this that brought on the quarrel between him and my father. And while I regretted this family trouble, and my part in it, I was really relieved when my misguided brother left us. Nor did I dream then that I'd ever be indebted to him for a home. But here I am! And heaven alone knows what the future holds in store for me.''

Randall had been waiting for her to run down.

"Say, Aunt Polly," says he quickly, when she paused for breath, "did you ever hear my uncle speak of the spirits that he talked with in the dark as spirit witches?"

"Laws-a-me!" came the sharp exclamation. "I hope that *you* aren't developing an interest in his heathenish religion."

"I'm too good a Methodist for that."

"Spirit witches?" the words were spoken reflectively. "No, I never heard my brother use that expression. He was forever telling about spirit vibrations, and similar outlandish truck. But I can't recall that he ever said anything about spirit witches."

"And could you conceive," Randall followed up, "that he would hang a sword over the door of his house to keep out evil spirits, or bury a sword for much the same purpose?"

"Land of Goshen!" cried Aunt Polly, with distended eyeballs. "Are you trying to hint around that the sword just dug up was put in the path to protect us against evil spirits?"

"It's Trigger's story," Randall added thoughtfully, "that the sword was originally over Mr. Robin's cabin door for that purpose."

Up went Aunt Polly's thin hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"I can't understand it!" she cried. "It's beyond my comprehension. So let's say no more about it."

Upon first entering the house I had glanced around with considerable curiosity. And later Randall and I went through the rambling building from top to bottom, peeking in all of the drawers and closets. The turrets and odd gables provided the interior with many odd-shaped rooms, some of which were too small for a bed. It was indeed a story-book house. And how queer, I thought, as we continued our search, must have been the mental processes of the man who had conceived it. For in addition to the odd construction the walls of the various rooms were decorated with scenes from the famous Mother Goose book. When new, these pictures probably had been very pretty. But now the paintings of Little Red Riding Hood and others of her kind were faded, the plaster in many places having fallen to the floor. The furniture was dingy and dusty. And moths had eaten holes in the once valuable rugs. Yet many of the rooms had been untouched by decay. And here the new tenants had taken up their living quarters, it being Aunt Polly's plan to gradually restore the damaged rooms, as she could afford it, until the whole house had been made available for hospital purposes.

I had a peculiar breathless expectant feeling as Randall took me into the room from which the eccentric house owner had vanished so mysteriously. Here the walls were decorated with pictures of pigs. On one side of the room was the picture of Tom the piper's son, who, according to the old nursery rhyme, stole a pig and away he run. On the other side of the room was a panorama of the old man who went to market to buy a fat pig. Pigs, pigs, pigs! Pigs on the chopping block; a pig bodyguard; and pictured pigs! What *could* be the answer to this crazy riddle, I asked myself, as I stared stupidly at the unusual (and probably purposeful) wall decorations.

"Well," says Randall, watching my face, "what do you think of it?"

"I'm bewildered," says I.

"There used to be a rug beside the bed. But the detectives ruined it trying to analyze the blood spots that they found on it."

"And what was their final conclusion?" says I.

"That it was human blood."

I gave a queer laugh.

"If only the figures on the wall could talk, huh?"

"Yah," says Randall, "if——"

"Do you feel anything hanging around you?" I shivered.

"No," came the short reply.

"Neither do I. But I've heard dozens of people say that the house is full of spooks."

"Most lonely houses get that reputation, Trigger. But it's usually a lot of bunk. Somebody hears a queer noise in the house. And soon the report gets spread around that the place is haunted."

"But people actually saw lights here," says I.

"I don't doubt that," a grunt accompanied the words. "From the amount of plaster that Aunt Polly and I swept up, I wouldn't be surprised if you told me that the whole town had been out here tapping our walls."

"But how did they get in?" says I.

"Through one of the back windows."

I sort of caught my breath.

"Do you suppose," says I excitedly, "that old Charley Robin has been prowling around in here?"

"And why not?" came the easy reply.

"But he's the one who started the report about the ghosts," says I, kind of dizzy-like.

"Sure thing," Randall gave a self-satisfied gesture. "That kept others away."

Our search having met with no success, I started for home at four-thirty. And here I am

writing down the day's events just as they took place.

Another week of school starts to-morrow. And also some time tomorrow the public health board is going to decide on Aunt Polly's proposed pest-house scheme. Without wishing her any hard luck I hope that she gets turned down. For how can Randall and I find the vanished fortune if she fills the house with contagious patients?

Oh, yes, I want to tell you about a bright one that Tail Light pulled in Sunday school to-day. The teacher, wanting to use him in a program, asked him if he played on the piano. "No," says he, "my ma won't let me." "And why not?" says the teacher. "Because," says he, in that super-intelligent way of his, "she's afraid I'll fall and hurt myself."

Which, I think, is enough for one day.

CHAPTER IX

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

October 14—When I first woke up this morning I thought that I was in for another uneventful school day. But several important things have happened. First of all I got a peachy letter from my Uncle Ben. He sent me a short story, too, which he wants me to put into my diary. But the day's biggest news centers around Tail Light, who last night put on a disappearing act that has baffled the whole town.

He went to bed as usual with a dirty face. Later his ma heard him snoring like an old rusty buzz saw. It's her further story that she heard him cough up a bug or something shortly after midnight. But when she went into his room this morning to awaken him, the bed was empty.

Then began an extended and increasingly frantic search which ended in the yard, where the imprints of a ladder in a pansy bed under the vanished one's open window gave rise to the

startling theory that he had been kidnapped. Right there is where Mrs. Beale (who weighs over two hundred pounds) passed out of the picture, having fainted dead away. And the story is told around town to-night that little Mr. Beale wrenched his back in carrying her into the house, where sympathetic neighbors gathered quickly to help take care of her and speculate on the mystery.

The supposed "kidnapping" caused a big laugh in the school grounds, where Tail Light, of course, is well known. For we couldn't conceive that anybody would steal *him,* goofy little butter-ball that he is. Very probably, we agreed, his parents would find him hiding in some unexpected place. But I kind of sobered up to-night when I learned that the sheriff and his capable assistants were working on the puzzling case.

Nor did I suspect that there was any connection between this disappearance and the earlier similar disappearance of the meat-cutter until I bumped into old Charley in our back yard.

His queer actions drew my attention. And when I tackled him about the buried sword, he went all to pieces.

"I'm afraid!" says he, sort of quavering-like, the look in his eyes reminding me for all the world of a hunted animal. "I'm afraid!"

"Afraid of what?" says I, staring at him.

"Them evil spirit witches," says he.

Which, of course, gave me a fine chance to quizz him.

"What have they done now?" says I quickly, hoping that I could draw him out.

"Why! . . ." he focused his hunted eyes on me, sort of wondering-like. "Haven't you heered about the little Beale boy?"

He meant Tail Light!

"Suffering cats!" I squawked, as the shivers began to congregate in my backbone. "Do you mean to tell me that the evil spirit witches had anything to do with Tail Light's disappearance?"

"It was the sword," says he, in that mumbling, inarticulate way of his. "I shouldn't have let the b'y take it in the first place. An' when he brung it back busted I knowed right off, I did, that he was in fur trouble. Fur the spirit witches never forgit," came the solemn conclusion.

I continued to stare at him for several seconds.

"You're crazy," I finally told him.

But this, strangely, instead of further upsetting him, seemed to amuse him. And chuckling to himself like a simple old wag, he shambled out of the yard, a peculiar stooped, grizzled

figure, having left a basket of fish on the back porch.

"Where's the chief cook and bottle washer?" says my pa, in his jolly way, when he came home at supper time.

"Over to Slats' house," says I, "taking care of Mrs. Beale."

"Then it's true," came the sober inquiry, "that Tail Light has really been kidnapped?"

"That's the general belief," says I.

"I'd sooner think the kid skinned out of his own accord."

"So I thought myself," says I, "until I learned that he disappeared in his pajamas. And now old Charley Robin has put a kink in things."

"What do you mean?" came the quick inquiry.

"He told me to-night that Tail Light was lugged off by spirit witches, in pattern of the butcher."

I was given a quizzical amused look.

"And do you believe it?" a laugh accompanied the words.

"No," says I, as my good sense triumphed over my imagination.

Still, I told myself, it *was* kind of queer that Tail Light had vanished in exactly the same

manner as the mysterious butcher. And the more I thought about it the uneasier I got.

But my pa further laughed at me.

"Either old Charley's completely cuckoo," says he, "or he's trying to scare you."

"Maybe they ought to lock him up," says I uneasily.

"That's worth thinking about," came the reflective reply. "And it might be well to question the old man, too."

Shortly after that my ma called up on the telephone to inform us that we'd have to get our own supper, Mrs. Beale having had a turn for the worse. So we put on a nimble little cooking act with a can of beans and a box of crackers, after which I cleaned the ordered fish and parked them in a cool corner of the ice box.

Slats dropped in at bedtime for a little chat.

"I'm all broken up, Trigger," says he.

And he looked it, too. Which surprised me. For I had gotten the impression from the way that he and Tail Light scrapped over their caps and similar truck that they hated the sight of each other.

"Do you suppose," says I, as we further discussed the probable kidnapping, "that your pa will get a letter demanding ransom?"

"He expects to," came the gloomy reply.

Gosh! It was hard for me to picture anybody

paying out real money to get Tail Light back. But when I put my thoughts into words Slats got huffy.

"You're going to get a poke in the jaw," says he, kind of scrappy-like, "if you dare to say anything against my kid brother."

"Since when," says I, surprised, "did you develop such a deep affection for him?"

"I've always loved him," came the staunch avowal. "And I'm proud of him, too. There isn't a better small kid in town. The trouble is, I never fully appreciated him till after I lost him."

"Well," says I, "don't start crying about it. For I have a hunch that the gangsters who kidnapped him will be only too glad to bring him back when they find out what a big eater he is. Certainly if they have to keep him very long he'll eat up all the profits."

"It isn't anything to joke about," says Slats, with a long face.

"But how in the world," says I, giving him a curious look, "could anybody snitch the kid without waking you up? For you both slept in the same room."

"That's the puzzling part," says he.

"Were you chloroformed?"

"Not that I know of," he shook his head.

"What does the sheriff think about it?" I further quizzed.

"He's as bewildered as the rest of us."

A queer shivery feeling crept over me.

"Maybe," says I, "there's more truth in old Charley's 'spirit-witch' talk than we suspected."

"That's exactly what I told my pa," the words were accompanied by a brisk waggle. "But he laughed at me. And so did the sheriff."

"Do you suppose," the exciting theory then shaped itself in my head, "that old Charley himself engineered the kidnapping?"

"That isn't impossible," Slats gave free rein to his own imagination.

"But what could be his object?" I puzzled.

"Ransom, of course."

"Aw, shucks!" I gave the imaginative theory a swift kick in the seat of the pants, disgusted with myself for having brought it up in the first place. "No one could ever convince me that old Charley would do a thing like that. He's queer. And he might be led along by his freakish religion. But he'd never steal a kid purposely to collect ransom. For that's regular crook stuff."

Later I got a ring from Randall.

"Did you hear the bad news?" says he.

"About Tail Light?" says I.

"No; about Aunt Polly's pest-house scheme.

After keeping her waiting all day the public health board finally called her up and rejected her proposition, telling her that there wasn't enough sickness in town just now to justify the operation of a pest house. So, don't be surprised, old kid, if you hear that we've moved over to the poorhouse."

I told him, of course, that I was sorry. And I was, in a way. Still it was a big relief to me to learn that we could proceed with the treasure hunt without any fear of bumping into a gob of smallpox germs.

"I wish now," he added, "that I hadn't urged Aunt Polly to buy that chicken."

"What chicken?" says I.

"Why, the chicken that we ate yesterday."

"Oh," says I, as a peculiar feeling crept over me, "*that* chicken, huh?"

"We really shouldn't have been so extravagant—not even for you, old buddy. But Aunt Polly was dead sure that her pest-house proposition would be approved. So we took a chance. And now I'm sorry, realizing that we should have saved the money for more necessary purposes."

"What's Aunt Polly doing?" says I.

"Mixing up a batch of buckwheat pancakes for to-morrow morning."

"Well," I wound up, "tell her not to get dis-

couraged. For with winter coming on, and its accompanying epidemic, she may be a whole lot closer to a nursing job than she thinks."

And now in conclusion I'll write down my Uncle Ben's letter. Here it is:

My dear Trigger:

I can readily comprehend your eagerness to turn those vexatious mouse traps into money. Yet how fortunate for you that the Ford Motor Company turned down your unique proposition!

Having read your latest diary with a great deal of interest (and considerable eye strain!), I share the enthusiastic opinion of my associates that there is a nice future for your books, as put into shape by our mutual friend, Leo Edwards. You aren't so "hot," I notice, when it comes to spelling and punctuation. And in places your diary leaves much to the imagination. But that will all be rectified by Mr. Edwards, who, having read the submitted job, has appropriately entitled it: *Trigger Berg and His 700 Mouse Traps.* If possible, we're going to put the book on sale next month, hoping that it will be well received by the holiday shoppers.

Mr. Edwards told me one time that his first accepted story was published in 1908

in the *Daily News* at Beloit, Wisconsin, where he was living at the time. It seems that this enterprising newspaper organization sponsored a Christmas-story contest; and Mr. Edwards, then a factory employee, won third prize. Here is a copy of the story. And it's my suggestion that you incorporate it in your current diary. The author, I think, will let it stand. And, of course, his wide circle of young readers will be interested in this early literary success of his.

Your loving uncle,
BEN BERG.

Which, I think, is a dandy letter. And I'll be only too glad to put Mr. Edwards' story (it's about a dog) into my diary. But having done so much writing to-night, I think I'll let the story go till tomorrow.

(Later.) My ma gave my pa Hail Columbia when she came home at ten o'clock and found the cat sleeping on the parlor sofa. And there was more sharp talk about the dirty dishes that my pa and I piled in the kitchen sink. Gee! It was a good thing for us, I told myself, as I further tuned in on the one-sided conversation, the objectionable cat having been put out of the house with a brisk broom, that we had carefully buried the one dish that we broke. Later my ma

tiptoed into my room and gave me a kiss, thinking that I was asleep. And did she ever screech when I suddenly threw my arms around her, the day's events having upset her nerves.

Mrs. Beale, I learned, had dropped asleep with one of Tail Light's pictures hugged to her breast. And Mr. Beale was waiting in the hall for the expected special-delivery letter, ready to pay out his last dollar to get the kidnapped one back.

"It's a queer case," says my ma, kind of bewildered-like, as she picked a piece of dirt out of my left ear. "I can't make head nor tail of it. One minute I think that the boy ran away—though how he managed it in his pajamas is a mystery to me. And the next minute I have the feeling that something a great deal worse than kidnapping has happened to him. No wonder his poor mother suffered a nervous collapse. If you ever came up missing that way, Trigger, I think I'd die."

After which, having given me another kiss, she hurried into the bathroom to scold my pa for dropping dirty towels on the floor.

And now I wonder if I'll wake up to-morrow morning and find Tail Light sitting on the edge of my bed. Gee! I hope so. I'm just beginning to find out that I love that fat little squirt myself.

CHAPTER X

THE FISH IN THE TUB

October 15—Another amazing thing has happened. When Friday and I went into his barn this noon to feed Dynamite we found a huge carp swimming around in the yellow bathtub. And when I tell you that it has eyes exactly like Tail Light (meaning the big fish, of course, and not the tub), you can readily see what I've got on my mind.

There's spirit witches around here, all right. And just as old Charley says, they're evil spirit witches, too. I had another talk with him this afternoon. And when he heard about the big fish he actually turned green. I asked him then if it was possible for the spirit witches to turn a boy into a carp. And he said it was.

As I understand it now a spirit witch is a kind of invisible spook. And, of course, an evil spirit witch is a spook with a mean disposition. According to old Charley's rather vague explanation, the world is full of spirit witches. And a

constant battle is going on between the good spirit witches and the evil spirit witches. Just at present the evil spirit witches in this section are running things to suit themselves, having completely routed the good spirit witches. In fact, it's old Charley's wild opinion that all of the good spirit witches in the neighborhood have been killed or taken prisoner. That's why he goes around looking so scared. For years, he said, he has been in direct communication with the good spirit witches, chiefly his own parents. And often he felt their loving fingers in his hair. But now whenever he tries to talk with them in the dark the victorious evil spirit witches slap him in the face. Gosh! It made me shiver just to hear him tell it. And what satisfaction people can get out of fooling around with a goofy religion like that is a riddle to me. But there are many thousands of spiritualists in the country, I was told, all of whom are in direct communication with the dead.

Having been put through a sort of third degree by the suspicious sheriff (thanks to my pa!), old Charley acted all worn out when I dropped in on him. I felt sorry for him. And it was because of this expressed sympathy that he opened up his heart to me.

To-night he's going to try again to get in touch with the good spirit witches. If he suc-

ceeds we'll probably get Tail Light back. For the good spirit witches, of course, will know how to break the enchantment, or whatever you call it. And in the meantime Friday and I are going to keep the big fish fed up well on angle-worms and dough-balls.

Poor little Tail Light! It certainly was an insult to him to be turned into a carp. For everybody knows what a carp is. And I'd like to take some of those evil spirit witches by the hair and crack their heads together.

I suppose if I told my pa and my ma that my missing chum had been turned into a carp they'd laugh at me. For grown-up people don't believe in truck like that. So Friday and I have sensibly decided to keep the important secret to ourselves. And how great will be the amazement of the sheriff and everybody else connected with the peculiar case when the facts about the double transformation (first from a boy to a fish and then from a fish to a boy again) are made public!

To-night when I was over to Slats' house I saw Mr. Beale pacing back and forth in the hall, expecting every minute, of course, to get word from the supposed kidnappers. Poor man! Little does he dream that his vanished son is now swimming around in a yellow bathtub with a stomachful of dough-balls. As for Slats, I

felt kind of guilty in holding out on him. But it's all for the best. Certainly Mrs. Beale would take on worse than ever if she knew the truth. And what a time the neighbors had with her this morning when she took a closer squint at the picture that she had fondled so lovingly throughout the long tearful night. For it wasn't Tail Light at all, but the stump of a tree with a mangy looking monkey sitting on it.

(Later.) Friday just came in on the tear. There was something the matter with Tail Light, he said, referring, of course, to the big carp, who, it seems, having overloaded its stomach with dough-balls (so much like Tail Light!), was now floating on its side. And the look in the enchanted one's bulging eyes, I was further informed by the panting newcomer, as I grabbed a flashlight and lit out for the barn on the run, was *awful.*

The ground was splotched with white moonlight. So I had little use for my flashlight until we came to the barn. And there I stopped dead still. Gee! Having heard so much truck about spirit witches, and the like, I was kind of scared at first to go inside. For it *was* fearfully dark in there.

Friday in the meantime had darted through the doorway. And following him, with fast-beating heart, I soon found out what was wrong

with poor Tail Light. It wasn't indigestion, as Friday had led me to believe, but the lack of water. The tub wasn't big enough for him. So, to save his life, we rushed him over to the Baptist church, where, after crawling through a window, we put him into the swimming pool under the pulpit.

"Nice old Tail Light," says I, as I tenderly patted him on the back. "We're with you, old kid."

And as though he understood every word that I was saying to him he gave me a last languishing look with his bulging eyes and sank like a hunk of lead to the bottom of the pool.

"Quick!" screeched Friday. "Get him out of the water and give him artificial repiration. For he's dying."

Gosh!

"I can't reach him," says I, as I sank my bare arms into the pool.

Then, losing my balance, in I went headfirst, clothes and all.

Friday had the flashlight, otherwise we would have been left in total darkness.

"How deep is it?" says he curiously, as he turned the light on me.

"Up to my neck," says I.

"Are you standing on the bottom?"

"Sure thing."

"How's the water?"

"Swell," says I.

"Gee! I have a notion to strip and go in."

And very probably he would have done it, too, daring little scamp that he is, if he hadn't heard voices at the front door.

"What's the matter?" says I, as the light went out.

"Sh-h-h-h!" a hiss cut the darkness. "Somebody's coming."

After which I heard the trapdoor, or whatever you call it, close over my head, Friday having taken that way to save me from possible detection.

Gosh! I don't mind telling you that I was scared stiff. Still, I didn't dast to scream for help. For I was a Methodist. And Methodists have no business taking a free bath in the Baptist's bathing pool. If I got caught I'd very probably go to jail. So I decided to keep shut and await results.

"Oh!" says a familiar gushing voice. "What a pretty little church. It's perfectly adorable."

Suffering cats! It was Miss Squeeze.

"I thought you'd like it," says a deep male voice. "That's why I insisted on showing it to you."

"Is that the choir loft?" came the further gushing inquiry.

THE FUNERAL OF " TAIL LIGHT."

Trigger Berg And The Sacred Pig. *Page 114.*

"Yes, darling," the masterful male voice tremoloed romantically.

"Now, Rodger! Don't get sentimental."

"I think you're adorable, Irene."

"Have I given you permission to call me Irene?"

"Oh, but you must!" came the burning plea. "For I'm desperately in love with you. Just think! I've known you for four whole days."

And then I heard a smack!

"Do you sing here every Sunday, Rodger?"

"Yes, darling," the deep voice vibrated with emotion. "And now every song that I sing shall be a song of praise."

After which there was another smack! Gosh! All I could think of was an old cow pulling its foot out of a mud puddle.

Friday told me afterwards that he counted twenty-seven smacks in all, six of which were double-headers. But it seemed like six hundred and twenty-seven to me.

Finally, though, everything tapered off into silence, after which Friday crawled out of his hiding place and released me.

"Gee!" says he, as I dragged my dripping carcass out of the bathing pool. And then he snickered.

Later I waded around in the pool till I found

Tail Light, who, when I brought him to the surface, was as dead as a doornail.

I thought Friday would swallow his Adam's apple.

"Shall we take him home?" says he, in a kind of hushed, stunned tone of voice.

"If we do," says I, "his ma will never get over it."

"But what *shall* we do?" came the further helpless inquiry.

"Bury him," says I.

The latter ceremony took place in Friday's back yard. And never will I forget the solemn feeling that stole over me as we took a last fond look at our ill-fated chum and nailed the top of the cheese-box coffin in place.

At Friday's suggestion we sang the chorus of "Yes, we have no bananas," having decided that the "banana" song, one of Tail Light's favorites, would be more appropriate than "Yankee Doodle" or "Old Dog Tray," after which I solemnly got our lodge Bible.

"The various bones of which the human skeleton is formed," I began the funeral oration, "are connected together at different parts or points, and these connections are called joints. The articular or adjoining ends of bones are covered with a thin membrane. This membrane is slightly elastic, and in places is sickened—I

mean thickened—which enables it to break the force of—of—"

"Concussion," says Friday, as he stood beside me with the flashlight.

"The thickness varies according to the shape of the bone which its covers," the solemn oration was resumed. "If the surface of the bone is convex or rounded——"

"Like a pumpkin," Friday again supplied.

"Where do you see that?" says I, squinting at the printed page.

"I just put it in," says he.

I jumped to a new paragraph.

"Bones forming movable joints are held together by—by—. What is it?" says I, pointing to the big word.

"It looks like cantilever bridges to me," says Friday. "But let's call it Amen and quit."

Thus the impressive services were brought to a solemn conclusion. And having properly completed and marked the grave, we separated for the night, satisfied that we had done our best, agreeing in conclusion that we would keep shut about poor Tail Light's fatal finish until his ma is strong enough to withstand the shock.

And now in conclusion I'll write down Mr. Edwards' story. Here it is:

ONLY A DOG

Skip stood near the curb, at the corner of

Grand avenue and State street and watched with longing eyes the happy Christmas shoppers. They were all so happy and joyful! Skip wondered what it all meant. He could not understand how people could be happy when the air was so biting cold and things to eat were so hard to find. What could it mean? He tried to reason it out in dog fashion—but failed.

The gay laughter of the passers-by reminded him of one other cold night a year ago. He had been attracted by the chiming of the church bells and had wandered hither to watch the many happy faces that entered through the door into what was, to Skip, an unknown region.

They were all so merry and care free. How miserable, poor, lank Skip felt. He was only a dog but somehow he realized that there was something due, even him, at this time of the year.

When the last of the merry throng had entered, Skip sneaked from the curb, to the door of the church. What a scene of beauty greeted his eye. The church was decorated with garlands of green; it seemed to Skip almost like a real woods.

From the chandelier, to the far corners of the room, were stretched streamers of many colors. Many colored lights gleamed all about, but the most beautiful thing of all, to Skip, was

a huge tree all aglow with tinsel and candles. For a moment he forgot himself and entered the church. Never before had he seen so much warmth and beauty. For a moment he forgot that he was not one of the merry throng; forgot that he was a dog; he tried to press forward when—he received a kick from a masculine foot and the door was shut in his face.

With a snarl he turned and trotted away. He was only a dog; yes, only a dog and not to be considered at this great time of merry making. He felt the line that was drawn between himself and the two-footed creatures that called themselves men. They had cast him from their joy because he was only a dog.

All this had happened a year ago, but it was fresh in his memory and he realized that it was all to occur again. He could see the signs of its coming upon the faces of the people passing by. It was all a puzzle to him. He could not understand it. Poor Skip, he was only a dog and could never know of Bethlehem, with its shining star and new born king.

"O! Papa! See the poor doggie." The sound of a childish voice caused Skip to turn. A large automobile had stopped at the curbing and a little girl was descending to the walk holding the hand of an elderly man. Her pretty

little face was almost concealed amid soft, white furs.

The man glanced at Skip, with a kindly face. "Poor dog," he said more to himself than to the child, "what a shame that animals are left to suffer."

"Can I take the doggie home with me, papa?"

"We can hardly do that, pet," the man answered smilingly. "But I will see that something is done for him." He motioned to a policeman standing near.

"Take this," he said, thrusting a silver dollar in the hand of the guardian of the law, "and buy the animal something to eat. He is so thin he looks almost famished. It is a shame and a disgrace to the city that such a spectacle of starvation be permitted to roam the streets. Whom does he belong to?"

"A stray, sir," the policeman answered as he grasped the fragment of collar about the neck of Skip. "There are many such, sir. They belong to no one and they have no home. This one has been about for years."

"And how does he live; does no one feed him?"

The policeman shook his head. "He picks up a few scraps, sir."

While the two men had been speaking, the

child approached Skip and began to stroke his bony back. At first he had almost been tempted to snap at her; he did not understand this kindness; he had always been used to kicks and blows.

"Poor doggie," the child said over and over again, and she gave him a farewell pat as the policeman led him away.

"What is the man going to do with him, papa?"

"He is going to feed him and give him a place to sleep, tonight at least; tomorrow I will start an investigation and some one will be brought to account for this display of cruelty." The child scarcely understood what the man was saying; he was speaking as to an elder.

The policeman led Skip away from the busy thoroughfare, and into an alley. He glanced about him and finding he was unobserved, he put the dollar into his pocket, gave Skip a kick in the ribs, and turned back to his beat. "Easy money," he chuckled to himself.

Poor Skip! He sneaked out of sight as quickly as possible. He did not understand what had occurred. How could he? He was only a dog.

He lay beneath the friendly shelter of a pile of old boxes, long after the policeman had gone. His side hurt where he had received the kick,

and he treated it freely with his tongue. How hungry he was. It almost made him feel weak and useless. He longed for it to get dark, so he could roam about unmolested. He closed his eyes, and no doubt took a nap, for when he opened them, the lights of the city were burning all about him. He crawled from his nest, across the alley out into the street and into another alley. How well he knew it! There was a savory smell in the air that seemed to Skip about the nearest thing to a dog heaven that could possibly be. It was the back door of a restaurant.

He started to make an investigation of the piles about him, but a growl in the dark caused him to flee in alarm. Bruno, the large, black dog he so much feared, was ahead of him and he knew it was either fight or flight. Skip was no fighter, so he quickly decamped. He searched in other places but found little to eat. How hungry and miserable he felt. He sneaked out upon the street and once again heard the merry chiming of the bells as they pealed forth their Christmas greeting. How he hated them! He turned and ran as fast as he could in the other direction. Away from the busy streets he ran and when he paused he found himself surrounded by towering houses, aglow with many lights.

He had never been here before and he vaguely wondered if there could be anything lying about loose that would help fill the stomach of a hungry dog. He cautiously approached the rear of one of the houses. He paused before a high board fence. The back yard was enclosed. He found the gate but it was latched.

While he was skulking in the shadows he heard voices upon the other side of the fence and the gate was opened by two women. They were servants and were going out for a good time after their day's work. They were laughing and talking and thus enabled Skip to slip through the gate unobserved. Skip gave a satisfied growl when he at last found himself inside of the fence. He glanced about him. Lights gleamed from the windows above and he felt a curiosity to know what was going on.

He climbed upon the porch and by bracing himself he could see into the room. To him it was the same old story; the merry laughter, the happy faces, the tree, the candles. But one thing was different and that was the little child who was dancing about the room. It was the little girl he had seen that afternoon, the only human being who had ever given him a kindly pat. He dropped from the window and sank out of sight in the shadows. He crawled to the

fence but the gate was locked. Back he went to the window and once more beheld the happy scene. With a whine he turned away his head and lay down upon the steps. How weak and hungry he felt. His eyes closed and he curled himself into a ball. The clock in the distance chimed the hours, but he noted them not. He was asleep.

. . .

The next morning the butler opened the side door and saw lying before him a mass of tangled and dampened fur. He gave it a kick, but it did not move.

"Dead," he said in disgust, as he kicked it from the porch. "Notning but a dog."

Gosh! I'm glad I don't have to write down that much truck every night.

CHAPTER XI

AMAZING DEVELOPMENTS

October 16—Before I went to bed last night I hung my wet clothes on the back porch, hoping that they would be dry when I got up this morning. I found, though, when I went downstairs to get them, that they were still soggy. So I hunted up an entirely new outfit.

"What happened to you?" says my ma. "Did you fall into the river?"

"No," says I, as I attacked the plate of pancakes that she had set before me, "I fell into a pool."

But I didn't tell her *what* pool. Nor did I give my pa a direct reply when he asked me why I was so quiet.

"Don't you feel well?" he pressed, regarding me curiously.

"Sure thing," says I, sneezing. "I feel swell."

"You act to me," my ma chipped in, "as though you were coming down with a cold."

Having secretly buried one of my chums, under circumstances that now seemed like a vague dream to me, it isn't to be wondered at that I was quiet. And what if I did have the sniffles? That was nothing to worry about.

When breakfast was over my pa followed me into the front hall where I keep my cap and sweater.

"Say, Trigger," says he, in that kindly way of his, as he placed a hand on my shoulder. "I think you better give old Charley Robin a wide berth hereafter."

"Why?" says I shortly.

"Well, from what the sheriff tells me I'm convinced that the old man isn't a fit companion for you. Not that he's liable to harm you; I don't mean that. But he may put a lot of absurd ideas into your head. For instance he told the officers night before last that he actually could talk with dead people. And he gave a long rambling account of a battle now being waged between conflicting spirits. Some of these spirits were good, he said, and some were evil. And it's his ridiculous assertion that the dominant evil spirits are responsible for the Beale boy's disappearance. All of which, to my notion, betrays an unbalanced mind. And the wonder is to me that the authorities don't confine him to the county infirmary and

have done with it. Then, if he does know anything about the butcher's disappearance, the truth will soon come out."

My ma paused in the doorway just as I separated myself from another husky sneeze.

"*There!*" says she triumphantly. "I knew very well that you were coming down with a cold."

And what do you know if she didn't drag me up to the bath room and dose me with castor oil! Oof! I thought I'd heave up my shoes.

"Now," says she, as she gave my necktie a final hitch, wanting, of course, to have me look as neat as possible, "be careful and don't get sweaty. Avoid drafts. And for goodness sake keep away from that pool that you fell into last night."

Which, latter advice, I could have told her, was entirely unnecessary. For considering who had died in the pool I didn't even want to look at it, much less get into it.

"How's Mrs. Beale?" says I, as I wiped my nose.

"Worse," came the short reply.

"Are you going over there to-day?"

"Not if I can get out of it."

Here she ran downstairs to answer the tele-

phone. And grabbing my cap I lit out for school.

Friday was waiting for me at the corner.

"Let's go around by old Charley's house," says he.

"No," I shook my head.

"Why not?" says he, shoving a curious look at me.

"My pa thinks he's cuckoo," says I. "And I've been told to stay away from him."

"Humph!" the word was spoken with a grunt. "He's been cuckoo ever since you were born. So why get so fussy about it now?"

Here we met Aunt Polly, who, with a leather bag in one hand and a folded umbrella in the other, was stepping it off on Main Street just as peppy as you please.

"Well," says she, beaming at me through her old-fashioned eyeglasses, "the good Lord has answered my prayer."

"What do you mean?" says I, searching her kindly face.

"I've finally got a nursing job."

"Hot dog!" says I, as tickled as she was.

"I don't know how long the job will last," she then ran on, in her talkative way. "It may be a day; and it may be a week. Nor will I get a chance to go home nights. So, unless you decide to keep Randall company, he'll have

to stay out there all alone. I told him that it was perfectly all right to invite *you.* But I set my foot down when he spoke of inviting four or five more. Laws-a-me! The house *would* look like a pig pen when I got home if I sanctioned such a plan as that. For don't I remember what happened when my brothers were left to keep house for themselves! The first thing Jake did was to call in the neighbor boys. And then it was rip and tear from attic to cellar. Once they made taffy candy. And when my mother got home she found gobs of candy all over the parlor, where some kind of a boyish battle had taken place. While she was cleaning up the mess the preacher called to solicit funds for the Hottentots. And what do you know if *he* didn't get stuck to a chair! Even worse, he ripped his pants. Right in the *seat,* mind you. But I can't stop any longer. For I promised Mr. Beale over the telephone that I'd get there by eight o'clock. The poor man! He's a nervous wreck, I guess. And while I've been hired principally to take care of his wife, it isn't impossible that I'll have the both of them on my hands before the day is over."

Gee! It kind of tickled me to learn that she was heading for Slats' house. For now she'd

have a chance to get acquainted with all of my ma's friends.

Yes, *that* part was lovely. But the idea of shifting boarding places didn't excite me for two cents' worth. Still, when Randall tackled me about it in the school grounds I let on that I was pleased. For I hated like the deuce to disappoint him. As he said, we'd have bushels of fun. In fact he laid so much emphasis on the "fun" part that I forgot all about my earlier fears of the queer house. Besides, here was a wonderful chance, I told myself, with mounting enthusiasm, to search for the vanished fortune.

And then my ma turned us down! Gosh!

Betty Sharpe and I collided in the schoolhouse hall this noon.

"If you and Friday should decide to put on another moonlight cantata," says she, in that uppish way of hers, "I certainly hope that you warn me ahead of time, so that I can leave home."

"What's the matter?" says I, wondering how much she had seen. "Didn't you enjoy the music?"

Up went her pug nose.

"It made me sick to my stomach."

That might have hurt my feelings a short

time ago. But nothing that she can say now will ever insult me.

Her curiosity then got the best of her.

"Were you burying something?" she inquired, leaning forward sort of eager-like.

Were we burying something!

"Good-by," says I, suddenly sobered. And away I ran.

Nothing else of importance happened through the balance of the day except that Tony the Terrible got fresh during the second recess and had to stay after school. Gee! I wish the teacher had used a club on him. He didn't have so much to say on Monday and Tuesday, the licking that he got last Saturday having toned him down. But to-day he was just as cocky as ever. And now that he has us outnumbered I dare say that he'll challenge us to fight another battle; or, like the big sneak that he is, he'll jump on us unawares.

Gosh! I'm sorry that we lost little Tail Light. For he sure put up a hot fight last week. Tears came into my eyes to-day whenever I looked at his empty seat. And once I touched it gently. It was here, I told myself, sort of choked-up-like, that he used to sit and make paper wads. And how ugly I had acted toward him when he socked me playfully on the neck! But I wouldn't mind that now

if I could only bring him back. Dear little pal! I think I'll write a poem about him and put it in my diary.

And did Friday and I ever snicker to-day in music class when one of the kids asked Miss Squeeze to play "Kiss me again" on the phonograph! Gosh! If she only knew what *we* know! It's a cinch she wouldn't dare to get funny with us.

(Later.) My ma just brought back word from the "house of sorrow," as she calls it, that Mrs. Beale is lying in a stupor. And Mr. Beale, having worn himself out pacing back and forth between the front door and the cold-air register, is sitting in the hall in a padded chair. It's a great wonder to the concerned neighbors why the supposed kidnappers don't write and thus make known their terms. But it's no wonder to me. For *I* happen to know that there are no kidnappers.

As for Aunt Polly, it's my understanding that she's the sensation of the neighborhood. Having spent an hour with her, my ma came home looking dizzy. Mrs. Beale did a lot of moaning when the neighborhood women were taking care of her. But the only way that she can attract attention now is by waving a pillow.

Gee! I'd hate to be Randall to-night. Think of him staying all alone in that big spooky

house. Br-r-r-r! I felt kind of huffy toward my ma when she turned us down this noon. But I'm glad now that she did it.

Oh, yes, I almost forgot to write down that I met old Charley to-day near the post office. He was peddling fish. Having been told to keep away from him, I would have passed him, with a curt nod, if he hadn't stopped me.

"It hain't no use, Trigger," says he, shaking his shaggy head. "It hain't no use. I *tried* an' *tried* to git the right spirit vibrations last night. But them evil spirit witches are too strong fur me."

I let him see by my actions that I had no interest in that kind of talk any more. Nor did I feel that it was necessary to explain to him, as he turned away with a puzzled look on his wrinkled face, that poor Tail Light was beyond all earthly help. Nothing could be done for him now except to provide him with a harp on the day of resurrection.

Still, if he doesn't get his arms and legs back he'll look blamed funny playing a harp.

And now for the poem that I made up about him. Here it is:

My Pal

Once there was a little boy
  Whose stomach was a sight.

He couldn't get enough to eat—
  He ate both day and night.

One day he broke a spirit sword,
  Which brought about his finish.
He now has fins instead of legs;
  His skin is kind of tinnish.

Deep in the ground he lies at rest,
  In a box that once held cheese,
While o'er his grave waves a gooseberry bush,
  Which— Gosh! I've got to stop and sneeze.

October 17—I sniffled worse than ever when I got up this morning. And when I went into the bath room to wash my hands I noticed that they were covered with queer little red spots.

"Now," says my ma, when she got a look at me, "you can see why I didn't want you to leave home last night. For I knew very well that you were going to be sick."

I showed her my hands.

"Do you suppose it's smallpox?" says I, kind of worried-like.

"Goodness gracious!" came the excited exclamation. "I believe you've got the itch."

Later Doc Fosse dropped in to take a look at me, my ma and my pa having decided that it would be best to keep me out of school until they had learned what was wrong with me.

"Um . . ." says Doc, as he examined my hands through a microscope. Then he cleared his throat. "Itch?" says he shortly.

"Yes, sir," says I again.

"Queer," says he, shaking his head.

My ma acted kind of scared.

"Surely," she says, "it can't be anything serious."

"Humph!" was the visitor's only reply, as he cleaned the lenses of the microscope with his necktie.

Then he took another puzzled look at my hands.

"When did you first start ailin'?" says he.

"Yesterday morning," says I.

"Was the rash noticeable then?"

"No, sir."

"Bones ache?"

"Yes, sir."

"Head feel dizzy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Been out of town lately?"

"I went camping week before last."

"Where?"

"Over by Potter's creek."

"Get your drinking water out of a well?"

"No, we got it out of a spring."

"Feel all right when you returned home?"

"Yes, sir."

"Been around any sick people lately, particularly sailors?"

"No, sir."

"Or in any strange houses?"

"None except the butcher's house," says I, "on the edge of town."

"And you're positive that the rash wasn't visible yesterday morning?"

"I didn't notice it."

"Let's see your tongue," came the gruff command.

"Tell him about the wetting that you got the other night," my man then prompted.

"Yes," the plainly puzzled visitor quickly endorsed the suggestion. "Let's hear about that."

"I fell into a pool," says I.

"What pool?" came the quick inquiry.

"Oh, just a pool," I squirmed.

"But I want to know *what* pool," the words were spoken sharply.

I couldn't very well answer that without telling him the whole story of poor Tail Light's fatal enchantment. So, to save Mrs. Beale, I made up a story. While chasing around in the

dark, I said, sorry that I had to tell a fib, but figuring that I was doing it for the best, I had accidentally tumbled into an old open well. But when he tried to find out exactly where the well was located, I got a sudden headache. I couldn't remember, I said. After which he told my ma to keep me in bed, while he held the case under advisement, and hurried away, his wife having telephoned something to him about a sick stork. I never knew, though, that he doctored storks, too.

My ma read to me this afternoon out of one of my "Jerry Todd" books. Like me, Jerry told a fib to protect a secret of his. And later he got into trouble. I wonder if that fib of mine, which still bothers me, will get me into trouble.

(Later.) Doc Fosse just dropped in to see me, telling me, sort of worried-like, that he has three other cases like mine, Friday, Tony the Terrible and Bloody Bill. And there's talk now of putting the whole bunch of us in quarantine.

Gee! I wonder what *is* the matter with me. I tried to find out; and so did my worried ma. But Doc wouldn't answer us.

(Still later.) I know now what's the matter with me. I've got what Doc Fosse calls the

sailors' itch. That's why he asked me if I had been around any sick sailors lately.

And when I write down further that I got it from Tail Light, who isn't dead at all, and never has been dead (Gr-r-r-r!), you can readily understand how disgusted I feel. Gosh! I'd like to take him down and pound the daylights out of him, tricky little brat that he is. MY PAL! It took me an hour to write that poem. And I kind of cried over it, too. That's what makes me so all-fired mad. And think of all the other disgusting junk that I wrote down, starting with the discovery of the big carp and ending with the solemn funeral services in Friday's back yard! Ye gods! I'm beginning to think that I haven't any brains at all.

Hating school, Tail Light decided more than a week ago to hide in the attic. And since then he's been saving up food. His ma wondered what became of her bread and other stuff. It vanished almost while she was looking at it. But she never connected this puzzling matter with the later disappearance until to-night when she found a picked ham-bone, seven empty bean cans, four empty cracker boxes, six empty sardine tins, sixteen raw potatoes, a head of cabbage, an empty water

jug, two raw carrots and an empty candy box in the attic.

But do you think that the little brat got a licking when he finally crawled out of his hole late to-night with red spots all over his body? Oh, no! Instead of lambasting him, Mamma Beale, whose recovery was almost instantaneous, very nearly suffocated him with kisses.

Later inquiries brought out the fact that he had been hiding in a trunk. And when Doc Fosse learned that the trunk belonged to a sailor, who had sent it to Mrs. Beale for safe-keeping, all wonder over the present epidemic ceased. The clothes that Tail Light took out of the trunk a week ago (that is when he got the disease, later passing it on to us) have been burned. And to-morrow the whole attic is going to be fumigated.

CHAPTER XII

IN AUNT POLLY'S CARE

October 18—Gosh! I'd hate to be in Tail Light's shoes. For outside of his own immediate family, meaning, of course, his ma and his pa and Slats, he hasn't a friend in town. And if he wasn't sick I honestly believe that the indignant neighbors would take the matter into their own hands and give him a deserved paddling.

For on top of tricking everybody, the sheriff included, he has plastered the whole town with sailors' itch. Not that he intended doing it. But that, unfortunately, is the way it worked out. And the people are blamed sore about it, too.

With seven contagious cases on his hands, and no place to take them, Doc Fosse called a special hurry-up meeting of the public health board last night, recommending that Aunt Polly's proposition, as earlier rejected by the board, be brought up for reconsideration. The

eager little old lady was there to speak for herself (it's my pa's story that she talked her audience dizzy!). And how great was her happiness when the exhausted board finally took favorable action on her proposition, agreeing to pay a certain amount weekly for each patient and also the regular nurse's fee. In that way she'll be able to board the probable patients at her own expense and still make some needed money.

This important matter having been settled to the satisfaction of everybody concerned, Doc then put in an emergency call for fumigating lamps, having decided that the quickest way to check the impending epidemic was by fumigating everybody in the neighborhood, particularly the volunteer nurses.

The first batch of fumigating lamps arrived from Garnet Corners on the eight o'clock milk train. And then the fun began! For the official fumigators literally had to fight their way into every house that they visited. And what those furious women said about Mrs. Beale! Oh! Oh! Oh! It certainly wouldn't look cute in a Sunday-school paper.

"I always knew that she was foolishly indulgent with her children," Mrs. Potter told my ma over the telephone. "But until *this*

happened I never suspected that she was stupid as well."

"You must remember," says my ma, who likes to be at peace with everybody, "that she has been fearfully upset during the past few days. Under these circumstances it isn't surprising that the boy escaped detection. Certainly if Trigger disappeared under like circumstances I'd never expect to find him hiding in his own attic. I was fooled. So was Mr. Beale. Nor did the sheriff, who supposedly is qualified to handle such matters, show any keener insight than the rest of us. So why blame poor Mrs. Beale?"

"Well," sputtered Mrs. Potter, "she might at least have given the boy a good paddling."

Doc looked more worried than ever when he came in at eleven o'clock and found that the red spots had crawled halfway to my vaccination mark.

"Still sniffling?" says he, after a prolonged study of the itchy spots.

"A little bit," says I.

"Eat your breakfast as usual?"

"Yes, sir."

"How's your head?"

"Clear as a bell."

"Humph!" he separated himself from a deep, stomachy grunt. "If it wasn't for the

puzzling rash I'd send you back to school. But I think I better put you in the detention hospital instead."

That brought a cry from my ma.

"Oh, no!" she remonstrated, with troubled eyes, as she put a protecting hand on me. "Please don't do that. I'm sure that he'll be all right in a day or two. So let me continue to take care of him. Please, doctor," she begged in conclusion.

The pursy visitor cleared his throat.

"I know exactly how you feel, Mrs. Berg," he spoke with more than usual kindness. "For I've got children of my own. But this is a matter involving the public health. And we must do what is best and safest for the community as a whole, regardless of individual preferences. If I didn't consider that it was necessary to isolate the current cases I certainly wouldn't suggest it. But it *is* necessary. Extremely necessary in fact. For I'm not having the success that I anticipated with my preliminary treatment. The disease is quite common in foreign parts, especially in the Asiatics. But so far we have seen very little of it in this country, thanks to our stringent quarantine laws and general sanitary conditions. How fast the epidemic will spread if it isn't checked at its source, I can't say, never having had any

direct experience with cases of this kind. But it isn't improbable that the whole state will suffer if we fail to do our part here. Hence my decision to isolate the current cases. Mrs. Fish has agreed to the proposed plan. So has Mrs. Crooker. And I shall depend on you to take the same sensible view of the matter."

Having met Aunt Polly, my ma realized, of course, that I would receive as good care at the new pest house as at home. But she still hated to give me up, as her manner showed.

"Do you want to go to the pest house, Trigger?" says she, turning her quizzical troubled eyes on me.

"Not if you don't want me to," says I loyally, slipping an arm around her waist.

Nor did Doc tell me that I *had* to go. But I dare say that is what he later told my pa, for here I am to-night in what Aunt Polly calls the Little Miss Muffet room.

It's considered a great honor among the Crocketville kids to ride in the big public ambulance. For it looks just like a hearse. So you can imagine how proud Friday and I were when the costly motor car drove up to our respective doors at two-thirty. On the way through town I wanted to sit up in front so that everybody could see me. But the driver

told me, sort of gruff-like, to stay inside where I belonged and shut up.

"Did you hear about Tail Light's ma?" says Friday, as the big ambulance rolled down the Elm Street hill, where Slats broke his arm one winter while coasting.

"What about her?" says I curiously.

"She almost separated Doc from his fringe of hair when he suggested taking her dear little ootsy-tootsy to the naughty old pest house. But Mr. Beale showed better sense. And having left the two of them to talk it over, Doc is hopeful now that he'll be able to move the patient without risking his own life."

"Mrs. Beale gives me a pain," says I.

"*And* how," says Friday.

"By the way," says I, "did you find out how that big carp got into our tub?"

"No," says he shortly.

"And we actually thought that it was Tail Light!" says I, with renewed feelings of disgust.

"If you'll take my advice," says Friday, whose feelings, of course, matched mine, "you'll quit talking about it. For if the kids ever heard of it they'd razz the life out of us."

"I'm shut," says I, with a click of my jaws.

"Here, too," says he.

"Still," says I, "I shall always wonder where that fish came from."

The butcher's one pretty private driveway was now cluttered with underbrush. So the chauffeur dropped us at the gate, where Aunt Polly was waiting for us, my ma having telephoned to her, sort of tearful-like, begging her to give me the best of care and not scold if I dribbled gravy on my shirt front.

"Goodness gracious!" came the familiar exclamation, as the waiting nurse peeked at our grinning faces. "You certainly don't look very sick to me. But I'm not going to complain about *that*. For I'd rather a dozen times over cook for you than to dose you with medicine." Then, having relieved us of our suitcases, she started briskly for the house. "Come," says she, "and let's get your things put away. For I'm expecting more patients within the hour, Doctor Fosse having promised to round them up as quickly as possible."

I learned this afternoon that Slats hasn't broken out yet. But Tail Light is a sight. I got a peek of him when he arrived at the pest house shortly after four o'clock. His face looked like a pimply pin cushion. He's got sore eyes, too. And all I could think of, as Aunt Polly and Doc Fosse helped him into the house, was the sickly three-legged cat that

hung around our house the winter my pa froze his big toes hunting rabbits.

Gosh! It isn't right to hate an old buddy when he's in trouble. I realized that now. And filled with sudden sympathy for Tail Light, Friday and I promptly forgave him, further pledging ourselves to be just as good to him as we knew how.

Having tried various kinds of dope on us, including a green-colored liquid that smelt like decayed onions, Doc is now depending on a yellow salve of his own manufacture to check the spreading rash. I've got the sticky stuff all over my hands and arms. And Tail Light, of course, is greased from top to bottom. For that reason he has to wear his pajamas and stay in bed, Aunt Polly having parked him on the second floor in the Little Red Hen room.

Now that I'm here I don't mind it at all. In fact I kind of like it. And did Friday and I ever hoot at Tony the Terrible, when he and the rest of his spotted gang, with the exception of Budge the Butcher, tumbled out of the ambulance at five o'clock and dragged their big feet up the winding path.

"Don't weaken," says I pleasantly, as the ferocious leader sort of balked at the front door, fearful, I guess, that when he stepped

inside old Zeno's ghost would pounce on him and start slicing him into noodles.

"Shut your face," he fired back at me, with a furious scowl, "or else I'll sock you so hard that the echo will break your hind leg."

"Tut! Tut!" came quickly from the attentive nurse. "That's no way for you to talk. Now that you boys are all thrown together in the same house, I want you to forget your earlier differences and act like brothers."

"Oh, yah?" says Tony the Terrible, in that insolent way of his.

"I like boys," Aunt Polly overlooked the ungentlemanly remark. "And if you behave yourself we'll get along splendidly. But if you don't," she stiffened, by way of warning, "I'll have to punish you."

"Haw! haw! haw!" jeered the insolent leader. "I've got a photograph of *you* punishing me. Why," he bragged, like the big bully that he was, "if you ever dared to lay a finger on me I'd push that pointed beak of yours through the back of your head and paint a sign on it."

Aunt Polly went directly to the telephone and called up Doc Fosse.

"When you first spoke about supplying me with guards," says she, in a sort of cool, capable way, "I thought they would be unnecessary.

But having changed my mind I'd suggest that you send them out here as soon as possible. And the bigger they are the better. For I have the feeling that I'm going the need them *inside* the house as well as *outside.*"

And did Tony the Terrible ever wilt! Gee! I thought I'd bust.

"I don't like it here," he squawked. "I'm going home."

"Stick around," says I, "for we're going to have some fun later on."

"Meaning which?" says he, making himself look as hard as possible.

"Well," says I, sort of airy-like, "having gotten here first, Friday and I thought it would brighten things up for you if we initiated you to-night. But don't be afraid," I added, "For we wouldn't hurt a nice little boy like you."

"Listen, Onion Breath," says he, tapping me on the shoulder. "You've got your wires crossed. Instead of initiating *me,* you're the bird who's going to be initiated to-night. And I don't mean maybe."

Later I sought Aunt Polly in the kitchen, where she was getting supper.

"Where's Randall?" says I curiously.

"I'm expecting him every minute," says she,

as she dropped a lot of chopped-up vegetables into a big iron pot.

"I thought maybe he was staying in town," says I.

"No," she shook her head. "I suggested that. But he wouldn't hear to it."

"He's running risks," says I, looking down at my spotted hands.

"I know it," says she, as she further busied herself at the stove. "And I realize, too, that once he comes into the house he'll have to stay here till the quarantine is lifted. But he was bound and determined to have his own way."

Friday was waiting for me in the hall.

"You were dumb," says he, "to spring that 'initiation' stuff on Tony. For now he and his gang are planning to clean up on the both of us."

"Well, what of it?" says I, sort of unconcerned-like.

"With four against us," came the worried reply, "we won't stand a chance."

"If you'll take one of them," says I courageously, "Randall and I will eliminate the other three."

"*Randall?*" I was given a quick searching look. "Has *he* got the itch, too?"

"No," says I, "but he's liable to get it.

For he's going to stay here with us till the quarantine is lifted."

That drove away the other's gloom.

"Hot dog!" says he, executing a few fancy dance steps. "Now we *will* have fun."

The old-fashioned electric-light bulbs with which the house was illuminated weren't strong enough to drive the shadows out of the corners. And I had a queer shivery feeling in my backbone as I passed from room to room.

Then, as something rolled down the hardwood stairs, I almost jumped out of my skin. For it sounded exactly like the clatter of hoofs.

"Sh-h-h-h!" came a sharp hiss from the head of the stairs.

"Who is it?" says I, with fast-beating heart.

"Me," says Tail Light.

The little nut! He *would* like to scare the wits out of me.

"What do you want?" I demanded, sort of grumpy-like.

"Something to eat."

"As usual," says I, trying to make my voice sound as disgusted-like as possible.

"But I haven't had anything since three o'clock," says he, acting for all the world as though he was going to sit down on the top step and weep about it.

"We'll let you know," says I, "when supper's ready."

"Say, Trigger," he spoke eagerly.

"Well?" I grunted, by way of inquiry.

"If Aunt Polly asks you to bring my supper upstairs on a tray, can't you fill your pockets, too?"

The little pig!

"Go back to bed," says I, "and shut up."

"I don't like it up here," he further peddled his woes. "It's too blamed lonesome."

"What do you want me to do?" says I cheerfully. "Send up old Zeno's ghost to keep you company."

"I wish Aunt Polly would let me sleep with you," he spoke wistfully.

"Yah," says I, "you *would* like to start me itching in some new spot."

"Ain't it awful?" he scratched vigorously.

"*And* how," says I, digging in pattern.

Aunt Polly in the meantime had gone to the front door to answer the bell. And did I ever stare when I peeked over her shoulder. For there on the porch stood old Charley Robin with a shotgun in his hairy hands!

"I thought as how you'd like to know, ma'am," says he, as he politely bared his shaggy head, "that I'll be close by in case you need me."

It took Aunt Polly several seconds to recover her voice.

"Do—do you know who I am?" she inquired, as she clutched the front of her dress.

"Yes," nodded the guard. "I know who you be. You're Zeno Giblin's sister. I recognized you the other night through the window. But I hain't holdin' nothin' ag'in you, ma'am. All of them hard words of you'rn is furgotten. An' havin' been hired by the public health board, I'm goin' to s'arve you an' *protect* you in every way I kin."

There was nothing alarming about his actions. In fact, he seemed to have completely lost that cuckoo look of his. But his words scared me. For they suggested that we *needed* protection.

Closing the door, Aunt Polly returned nervously to her work in the kitchen. And as I followed her down the hall I found myself wondering if the old spiritualist, to whom the secrets of the rambling unusual house were a probable open book, had peculiarly sought this new job of his?

If so, was my concluding thought, as I took note of the fast gathering darkness, out of which the adjacent pine trees loomed like huge, pitiless giants, something was liable to drop.

CHAPTER XIII

SEARCHING FOR THE TREASURE

October 18 (*Continued*)—Tail Light again signaled to me from the head of the stairs.

"Is supper ready?" says he hungrily.

"Oh, for the love of Mud," I yipped, "go back to bed and *shut up.*"

"What do you think I am," says he stiffly, "a folding davenport?"

Then, as I started for the kitchen, he called me back.

"Say, Trigger," says he.

"Well?" says I shortly.

"What's the chief use of a cow's hide?"

"To hold the cow together," says I, as I ran to answer the telephone.

"Is that you, Trigger?" came a familiar voice.

"Nobody else but," says I.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine and dandy."

"Have you had your supper?"

"Not yet."

"Your father and I had tomato soup to-night."

"Um-yum-yum!" says I. For, bu-lieve me, there isn't a better tomato soup maker in the whole county than my ma.

"How is Friday?" she then inquired.

"As chipper as ever," says I.

"And Tail Light?" came the further earnest inquiry.

"Well," says I truthfully, "he looked kind of gooey. But it hasn't affected his appetite any."

"The poor little fellow!" she sympathized.

"Aunt Polly put him in the Little Red Hen room," I informed, "and I'm in the Little Miss Muffet room."

"What an odd way of distinguishing rooms!"

"They get their names," I explained, "from the Mother Goose pictures on the walls."

Here Friday whizzed into sight.

"Who are you talking to?" he mumbled, with his mouth full of cookies. "Betty Sharpe?"

"Go lay an egg," says I

"What's that?" says my ma, kind of surprised-like.

"I was talking to Friday," I grinned.

"Well," she prepared to hang up, "be a good boy. Mind Aunt Polly. And give me a ring now and then. For I shall worry about you no matter how well you are taken care of."

Having heard about the vanished fortune, Tony the Terrible and his pimply gang were prowling through the upper part of the house, hopeful, of course, that they'd find a bag of gold tucked away in some dark corner. Friday and I could hear them banging doors. But the treasure hunt came to a sudden halt when Aunt Polly sounded the supper call.

Randall came in just as we were sitting down to the table.

"Hi," says he, giving my hand a friendly pinch.

"What's the matter?" I grinned. "Did Miss Squeeze make you stay after school and do sums?"

"I've been working," says he, further explaining that an old married couple on Moore Street had paid him a dollar for carrying in furnace wood.

"But why give the money to me?" says Aunt Polly, as the crumpled greenback was placed beside her plate.

"Because," came the grinning reply, "I want to get in practice."

The little old lady didn't quite understand that.

"Practice?" she repeated, sort of puzzled-like. "What do you mean?"

"Some day," came the laughing explanation, "I'm going to earn *real* money. And you're going to get it all."

Gee! Who couldn't love a kid like that?

He then got my ear.

"Say, Trigger," he inquired, kind of anxious-like, "does Aunt Polly know that old Charley Robin is out in front with a shotgun?"

"Sure thing," says I. "He's the new guard."

"Gosh!" came the startled exclamation. "Do you mean to tell me that he'd actually shoot if he caught one of us trying to sneak out of here?"

"I'd hate to take a chance," says I.

"But that would be murder."

"Maybe the gun is loaded with paper wads," says I.

"How queer though," the words were accompanied by an added puzzled look, "that the public health board hired *him*."

"I think myself," says I, kind of excited-like, "that he solicited the job."

"For what reason?" came the quick inquiry.

"To protect us."

"From what?"

"That's what I'd like to know," says I, with an uneasy shrug.

The dizzy look deepened on the other's face.

"I'd hate to think," says he, in conclusion, "that you're right."

"Time will tell," says I, sort of prophetic-like.

Here we got a sharp reprimand from Aunt Polly for whispering at the table. And all the time, of course, the Crooker outfit was gobbling down the vegetable stew like a lot of half-starved pigs.

"Get your mitts off my bread," bellowed Bloody Bill, bracing himself in his chair like a crouching tiger.

"Who are you yapping at?" growled Toothless Tom.

"You," came the further bellow.

"If anybody happens to ask you that's my bread."

"Oh, yah?"

"There's my finger prints on it."

"Sock him," put in Tony the Terrible, taking Toothless Tom's side.

I was glad that Aunt Polly had put them together at her own end of the table. And did she ever light into them now! Oh, baby! Best of all she made them go without their pie.

I got two pieces and Friday got three. But, of course, *he* would take advantage of that big mouth of his!

"Never mind," Tony the Terrible glared at us, as he slouched out of the dining room. "We'll get even with you birds before the night is over."

Randall and I helped Aunt Polly with the dishes, noticing, as we gave the dirty dish water a flip from the back porch, that the moon had lifted itself out of the pine trees. And did they ever look spooky!

"I bet you were glad," says I, "when Aunt Polly came home last night."

"*And* how," says he.

"I thought of you the night you stayed alone," says I, as I dried the inside of the pan with the dish-rag. "But, if I must tell you the truth, I was kind of glad that I wasn't here to keep you company."

"If I had let myself believe that the house was actually haunted," says he, in his steady sensible way, "I probably would have been scared out of my wits. For it *is* blamed lonely around here. But I made up my mind not to be scared. So everything came out all right."

"Tell me the truth," says I curiously, as I further squinted at the mysterious looking pine trees, in one of which an owl was hooting dole-

fully. "Have you ever heard any spooks around here?"

"Not a thing," he confessed earnestly.

Here I was reminded of Tail Light by the sight of his lighted bedroom window on the second floor.

"Suffering cats!" I squawked. "The little kid missed his supper."

But Aunt Polly laughed, in her gentle kindly way, when I dashed into the kitchen.

"Don't you worry about the little Beale boy," says she, learning the cause of my excitement. "For I took care of *him* before I dished up the food for the rest of you."

"And you're sure he got enough?" says I, kind of anxious-like.

"That all depends on what he calls enough," says she, hurrying to complete her housework. "Certainly he got all he needed."

Doc Fosse waddled up the winding path at seven-thirty, complaining, in his rumbling stomachy way, because he couldn't drive his rattly flivver clear up to the front door. Nor did I understand why he was so anxious to drive closer to the house till old Charley, who, since the arrival of the moon, had taken to pacing sinister-like around and around the house, later showed up at the front door with a white wheeled operating table on his back.

"I thought I better bring it out to-night while I had room for it," Doc told Aunt Polly, as the light steel table was brought inside, "for there's no telling when we're liable to need it."

"Good night nurse!" squawked Tony the Terrible, with bulging eyes. "You aren't going to cut us open, are you?"

"Not if you behave yourselves," grunted Doc, sort of dry-like, as he ordered us to line up for inspection.

That took several minutes. And satisfied that the latest treatment was accomplishing the desired results, he hurried away, to take a bean out of some baby's nose, telling Aunt Polly, as he blocked the wide front doorway, to keep us well greased.

"And I'll see you in the morning," he concluded, banging the door behind him.

The silence that followed his departure didn't last long, the Crookers having discovered that it was a lot of fun to run the rubber-tired operating table up and down the long hall.

"How do you get that way?" blustered Tony the Terrible, when Friday and I tried to jump on.

"We've got just as much right to play with it as you have," I stood my ground.

"Sock him," Bloody Bill nudged the leader.

"Yah," I fearlessly faced the latter, "go ahead and sock me and see what you get in return."

But he didn't dare to sock me, big bully that he was. For he knew blamed well that he'd get the worst of it.

"Come," says Aunt Polly, from the doorway of the sitting room, where a cheerful wood fire had been kindled in the old-fashioned fireplace, "let's have a game of dominoes."

But that sounded too tame for me. And signaling to Randall, he and I put on another intensive search for the hidden fortune.

Tail Light heard us tapping the walls in what we called the Pig room.

"Gosh!" says he, as he appeared in the doorway in his pajamas. "I thought it was a ghost."

"It's time you were asleep," says I.

"What are you searching for?" he quizzed.

"Hidden gold," says I.

"Oh!" came the disappointed exclamation. "I thought maybe it was something to eat."

Randall grabbed a bed slat.

"Hold him," says he, brandishing the slat, "and I'll put him out of his misery."

Failing to find any trace of the hidden money, we wound up in Tail Light's room. Nor did we leave there till he had dropped

asleep. The poor little kid! He wouldn't admit it. But the true cause of his restlessness was homesickness.

"This morning," says I, sort of quiet-like, as I looked down at him, "I hated him. But now I love him."

"You really didn't hate him," says Randall, who stood beside me with a hand on my shoulder. "You just thought you did."

Then we turned as Aunt Polly tiptoed into the room.

"Is he asleep?" she whispered, glancing at the bed's motionless occupant.

I nodded.

"I meant to treat his eyes before he finally closed them. But rather than awaken him now I think I'll delay the treatment till morning."

Here a bellow came from below.

"You did, too, cheat," bawled Tony the Terrible.

"I didn't either," Friday dished out some masterful gab of his own.

"For two cents I'd sock you."

"Hey, Trigger," Friday yelled up the stairs. "Lend me two cents."

"I'm coming," says I.

"Laws-a-me!" cried Aunt Polly, as she followed me down the stairs. "Why is it that

boys can't be together for ten minutes without quarreling?"

"Shucks!" says I. "We aren't really sore."

I failed, though, to make her understand that we just blattered at each other that way to have a good time. And disgusted with us she sent us all to bed, the Crookers on one side of the hall, and the rest of us, Randall included, on the opposite side.

"Now remember," she told us in conclusion, as she got ready to mount the stairs to her own room, "the first boy who causes a disturbance between now and morning has to wash the breakfast dishes. Moreover, if there is a general disturbance, I'll make you all eat mush instead of pancakes."

In the silence that followed her disappearance up the stairs I could hear muffled footfalls in the hall. Then a light tap sounded on my door.

"Who is it?" says I cautiously.

"Friday," came the whispered reply.

"What do you want?" I admitted him.

"Let's sleep together," he suggested.

Later Randall came into our room from the adjoining one through a secret closet door. And now it's our scheme to use this secret door in tricking the Crookers.

Boy, I bet we have fun. But we'll have to

be blamed quiet about it. For Aunt Polly wasn't talking through her hat when she dished out that "mush" talk. And who wants to eat junk like that? Oof!

It's now close to eleven o'clock. I've been writing steadily for almost an hour, during which time Randall and Friday have been sitting on the edge of the bed playing checkers.

Gee! I'll have to quit now. For the enemy is stirring across the hall. And that, of course, means the looked-for attack.

(Later.) Well, the battle's over with. Nor was it much of a battle at that. For the Crookers had everything their own way. Gr-r-r-r! It makes me sick to think how easily they outwitted us. And if you could see me now, as I sit here writing in my diary, you'd probably laugh your head off. For I'm completely plastered with itch grease. At least I *was* plastered with it until I wiped myself vigorously with a dry towel.

We had a good scheme, all right. But the blamed secret door went back on us. Nor do we know yet what caused it to latch, when it wasn't supposed to latch, unless some rusted part of the lock suddenly loosened up.

Anyway, here's the dope:

I went to bed, letting on that I was sound asleep. Pretty soon the hall door opened (we

had purposely left the door unlocked). And into the room tiptoed Tony the Terrible and his trusty lieutenant Bloody Bill.

Fearing a trap, they peeked guardedly under the bed and into the clothes closet, little suspecting that there was a secret door in the back of the closet. Apparently I was unprotected. So they made a grab for me, congratulating themselves on their rare good luck. And right then is when Friday and Randall should have appeared on the scene with their clubs. If they *had* appeared, according to schedule, the victory would have been ours, and an easy victory at that. But, as I say, the blamed door stuck. I could hear my excited chums hammering on it. And by the time they got the hall door unlocked the triumphant Crookers had whisked me into their own quarters, where I was stripped to the skin and made to pose on the operating table. Having stuffed pillows into his pajamas, to give himself a sort of fat professional look, the leader, who further had rimmed his eyes with blacking in imitation of huge eyeglasses, let on that he was an instructor in a medical school.

"Now, students," says he, sort of pompous-like, as he grabbed the lower part of his sagging stomach and pulled it back to place, "if you will give me your close attention I'll ex-

plain to you the various parts of the human anatomy."

"Yes, Professor Sloppysox," says Toothless Tom, as he craned his neck.

"This," I was given a slap on the bare stomach, "is his pie pouch."

"Wait a minute," says Bloody Bill, pretending that he had a note book in his hands, "while I write it down."

"And this," I got a thump in the neck, "is his Adam's apple."

"Has it got seeds in it?" naïvely inquired Kavey the Killer.

"Never having bit one open," says the professor, as he further hitched at his sagging stomach, "I can't say."

Following which he gave my ears a sharp yank.

"I suppose you know what these are?" says he, to his gaping audience.

"What?" chorused the pretended students.

"The common name for them is cap rests."

And so they kept it up, calling my feet canal boats and my nose a halitosis tester, after which, as I say, they greased me from head to foot and dumped me in the hall, where my sick-acting chums, until then unable to reach me, took care of me.

Of course I could have stopped it all at the

start if I had yelled for Aunt Polly. But I'm not that kind of a kid. I know how to take my medicine. And I know how to give it, too, as Tony and his crummy outfit will learn to their sorrow before I get through with them.

To-night was their night. The luck was all theirs. But to-morrow night will be *our* night.

Whoopee!

CHAPTER XIV

THE ZERO HOUR

October 19—Old Charley was still on duty when I got up this morning. He looked kind of droopy, though. And his steps, as he continued to pace around and around the big house, were noticeably slower.

Taking pity on him, Aunt Polly supplied him with a big plate of pancakes and a cup of strong coffee. Then, shortly after eight o'clock, he was sent home to rest up, with orders to return at dusk, Doc Fosse having provided another guard for daylight duty.

We were still sitting at the breakfast table when Doc arrived, as bustling and big-voiced as ever, to give us the usual once over.

"Well," he addressed the bright-eyed attentive nurse, whose unbroken rest had brought her renewed strength, as her manner showed, "how did your lively young charges behave themselves last night?"

"Their conduct was splendid," came the

warm praise. "And as a reward I baked pancakes for them this morning."

"Um . . ." Doc manufactured the sound deep down in his throat. "Ordinarily I'd say that was a rather heavy diet for hospital patients. But I calc'late it's all right in this particular case."

"When it came time for us to go to bed last night," the little old lady felt called upon to emphasize our supposed good behavior, "I told the boys that I wouldn't stand for any monkeyshines. The first one who created a disturbance, I said, would have to wash the breakfast dishes. And if they *all* got to acting up, I further laid the law down to them, they'd have to eat corn-meal mush this morning. I'm happy to report, though," she beamed in conclusion, "that the night passed without a particle of disorder."

Even my own gang joined in the titter that followed. Then, as Tony the Terrible caught sight of my red face (he thought he was terribly smart, all right!), he busted right out. Boy, did I ever long to sock him! But dear old Aunt Polly was too innocent-minded to suspect the cause of the outburst.

"Yes, Doctor," came the annexed report, "they're good boys, though a trifle rough. I

AUNT POLLY SUPPLIED OLD CHARLEY WITH PANCAKES AND COFFEE.

Trigger Berg And The Sacred Pig. *Page 167.*

love them all. And I'm doing everything I can to hasten their recovery and keep them happy."

"Well," Doc got down to business, "suppose we line them up and see how the spots are this morning."

Here Tail Light appeared at the head of the stairs, reminding me for all the world of the sleepy-acting kid in the Fisk tire ad.

"Can't I come down, too?" says he, kind of lonesome-like.

"The poor little lamb!" Aunt Polly's heart was touched. "I really think I ought to keep him down here during the daytime, doctor. He'll be all right, I'm sure, if the fire is kept going."

"Yes," came the rumbling consent, "bring him over here by the fire and let me take a look at him."

Nor did Tail Light need a second invitation. Boy, he was down those stairs in two jerks of a polliwog's tail!

"Who kissed me in the middle of the night?" he inquired, kind of curious-like, as Aunt Polly unbuttoned his pajamas.

"Probably it was me," admitted the kindly nurse.

"Gee!" he turned a pair of shining eyes on her. "I thought it was my ma."

And I had tried to make myself hate him!

"How are you feeling?" says I, as I slipped

up to him and gave his greasy hand a friendly squeeze.

"Pretty good," says he, acting pleased.

"Are you well enough to take part in a fight?" says I, in a low voice.

"Sure thing," says he, sort of eager-like.

"The chances are," says I, "that we'll put on a final battle tonight with the Crooker gang. So don't be surprised if I pull you out of bed sometime between ten o'clock and midnight."

"I'll be ready," he promised, loyal little squirt that he was.

Doc then took him in hand.

"You're a whole lot better this morning, Sonny. Your skin is beginning to clear up. And your eyes show less infection."

"I still itch," came the uncomfortable complaint.

"Of course," the words were accompanied by a characteristic grunt. "And you'll probably keep on itching for another week or two. But I'm confident now that you'll come out all right in the end."

"That's exactly what I told his ma when I called her up this morning before breakfast," beamed Aunt Polly.

Which reminded me that my own ma was entitled to a ring. So, when Doc completed his examination of me, I beat it for the telephone,

where a rather lengthy conversation took place. I was feeling fine and dandy, I said, having had a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast. Nor did my interested parent suspect why I snickered when she asked me if I was keeping myself well greased. Boy, as Doc had said when he peeked inside of my underwear, I was the greasiest one of the bunch!

Considerable anxiety still existed in the neighborhood, my ma said. But so far no new cases had been reported. And it was generally hoped now that the epidemic would be quickly stamped out.

"Did the public health board fumigate you, too?" says I curiously.

"Oh, yes," she laughed, "we got it along with the other neighbors, who quit coming here when you broke out. Nor are they satisfied yet that the danger is over with. For they're still giving us a noticeably wide berth. And is it ever amusing to watch them! If one starts scratching the others all turn and run, like a flock of frightened pullets."

Here I got a call from inspection headquarters. And putting a quick finish on the telephone conversation I hurried back to the sitting room, where Tail Light was sitting in comfort beside the open fire.

"I've just been telling the boys," waggled

Doc, squinting at me over the top of his big eyeglasses, "that you showed mighty good sense in greasing your whole body. You did a splendid job of it, too. So I'm going to let you try your hand at greasing the others."

Which brought an immediate yap from the head of the line.

"I won't stand for it," bawled Tony the Terrible, who knew very well what kind of a greasing he'd get if *I* dished it out to him. Oh, baby!

Doc acted surprised. For usually his orders were accepted without question.

"What do you mean?" he grunted, sort of stiff-like, as he hoisted his bushy eyebrows to take a look at the rebellious speaker.

"If there's any greasing to be done on *my* body," Tony further blustered, "I'll do it myself."

"You heard what I said," Doc bristled, unwilling to brook any interference.

"Oh, gee!" wailed Tony, giving me a furious look. "I don't see why you favor him. For he isn't half as smart as you think."

But Doc was as immovable as the rock of Gibraltar itself.

"I'm still convinced," says he, as he got ready to leave, "that Trigger is the right one to supervise the greasing job. And if you don't

submit peacefully, he has my permission to call in the guard."

After which the fun began.

"You're first," I beckoned to Bloody Bill. Nor did he dare to hold back. Boy, the way I slopped the itch grease on that bare stomach of his was a caution! Toothless Tom came next. Then Kavey the Killer. And all the time poor Tony the Terrible, the king of the roost, so to speak, was quaking in his shoes like a young Vesuvius. For he knew blamed well why I was saving him to the last.

"All right," says I, as Friday and Randall tipped up the slippery operating table, thus dumping Kavey the Killer onto the floor. "Now bring on the big boy himself."

And did the latter ever bellow as we grabbed him and flopped him onto the wheeled table! Boy, from the commotion that he stirred up you'd think that we were getting ready to separate him from his windpipe.

"By the way," says I to my grinning assistants, who earlier had greased each other, "did I ever explain to you the various parts of the human anatomy?"

And realizing what was coming, Tony dished out a groan that could have been heard a block away.

"If you did," says Friday, in answer to my question, "I forgot about it."

"That being the case," says I, grabbing a handful of grease, "I'll have to do it all over again."

And down came the grease kerplunk! on Tony's bare stomach.

"*Ouch!*" he squawked, doubling up.

"This," says I, sort of professional-like, as I briskly massaged the grease into the skin, "is his pie pouch."

Then I grabbed another generous handful.

"And this," says I, socking him in the neck (Friday was sorry afterwards that I didn't aim higher!), "is his Adam's apple."

"Has it got any seeds in it?" quizzed Randall, in pattern of the other smart alecks who had messed me up.

"Never having bit into one," says I, acting my part, "I can't say."

And all the time poor Tony the Terrible was moaning and groaning to beat the cars.

"I wish I was home!" he wailed, over and over again. "I wish I was home!"

Here Aunt Polly tapped on the door.

"Are you sure," says she, kind of dry-like, "that you aren't purposely stretching out that greasing job?"

"They're killing me," blubbered Tony, hope-

ful, of course, that she would rush into the room and rescue him.

"All right," says I, signaling to my willing assistants. "I'm through with him."

And up went the end of the operating table!

There was another blubbering yap from Tony as he landed in a heap on the floor.

"You're going to suffer for this," he blustered, as he jabbed his greasy legs into his underwear. "I'm going to tell my pa when I get home. And he'll knock the stuffing out of you."

But that kind of talk didn't scare us. For we had done nothing that he hadn't done himself. Besides, Doc Fosse had prescribed it.

Told that the greasing job was completed, Aunt Polly looked relieved. And then did she ever jaw when she saw the operating table. For it had almost as much grease on it as the complaining Crookers themselves. And there on the hardwood floor, where the patients had landed in turn, was another grease spot as big as a wash tub.

Later a triumphant shout arose from the enemy's camp when they learned, over the telephone, that the fifth member of their gang was due to arrive at the pest house later in the day, having broken out overnight in the pattern of the others.

"I guess you birds will take a back seat now," the cocky leader strutted around in front of us.

He kind of had a hunch, I guess, that we were planning to clean up on him when night came. But with five on his side, he felt confident now that he could easily beat us at our own game.

Tail Light had promised to help us. More than that he *wanted* to help us. But somehow I had the feeling that we couldn't expect very much from him. Certainly, was my conclusion, we'd forever regret it if he got banged up in the inteendd battle and had a relapse.

Three against five! It looked kind of bad for us, all right. Still we didn't lose heart.

And then—oh, happy moment!—Slats called up to tell us that he, too, had broken out overnight.

"How do you like that?" I carried the grand and glorious news to the opposing leader.

"Bah!" says he, pushing out his mug.

"You'll 'bah!' worse than that," I predicted, "before we get through with you."

It was cooler now. Regular October weather, in fact. And every hour or two we had to lug in an armful of wood.

"Gee!" says Tail Light, as we fired up largely for his benefit. "I wish that *I* could go outside."

"Why tempt the squirrels?" Tony the Ter-

rible dished out one of his customary mean cracks.

"It's a cinch," was Tail Light's quick reply, "that the squirrels wouldn't pay any attention to *you* unless they were collecting solid-ivory billiard balls."

"Oh, yah?" Tony screwed up his face.

Tail Light had a writing tablet in his lap.

"By the way," says he, "how many kinds of milk are there?"

Which, I thought, was a sort of goofy question.

"What do you mean?" says I, "the kind of milk that we get in bottles?"

"Sure thing," he nodded.

"Well," I put my colossal brain to work, "there's fresh milk and condensed milk, if that answers your question. But what's your idea in asking it?"

"I'm drawing a picture of a cow," says he, spitting on the point of his pencil, "and I wondered how many faucets I ought to show."

"Haw! haw! haw!" boomed Tony. "You're getting smarter every day."

Slats' arrival at two-thirty was followed by a hilarious trip through the house. Nor did the Crookers let us get out of their sight, fearful, I guess, that we'd find the treasure ahead

of them, it being their plan to keep it if they once got their mitts on it.

At Randall's suggestion we then went outside and parked ourselves on the wood pile, where we further discussed the coming night's intended battle. And did we ever have fun when a couple of Tony's supposedly clever spies tried to sneak up on us with sharpened ears. For that stove wood made wonderful ammunition.

The schoolhouse was idle to-day. For it was Saturday. And spotting a couple of kids, as they cut through the neglected orchard with a bagful of walnuts, we tried to stop them, to find out what was going on in the outside world. But as soon as they caught sight of us they lit out for home lickety-cut.

"Evidently," laughed Friday, as we gave up the chase, "somebody has hinted to them that we've got the sailors' itch."

"How do you get that 'we' stuff?" Randall joked in turn.

"Don't worry," the freckled speaker jiggled his head. "You'll have it, too, before another week has passed."

"Aunt Polly thinks that the grease will act as a preventative."

"Oh, yah?" says Slats, taking a close peek at the other's hands. "Well, Over-confidence,

you better give yourself a little rigid inspection. For if anybody happens to ask you, you're breaking out already."

"By George, you're right!" cried Randall, as he sleuthed his hands.

"Hip-hip-hurray!" yipped Friday, starting off on another of his hilarious dances. "Now we're all in the same boat."

Budge the Butcher didn't show up till five o'clock, at which time old Charley again came on duty.

"What makes you so dirty?" says I curiously, when he and I bumped into each other near the wood pile. "Have you been cleaning out somebody's chimney?"

"Humph!" growled the old man. "I reckon as how you'd be dirty, too, if you'd worked as hard as I did this afternoon. First I salvaged the iron beds in the cellar of the old pest house. Then I took the ruined furnace apart. An' when I left to-night the junk man, who bought the hul shootin-match fur ten dollars, further payin' me two dollars to help him, was loadin' up the chimney bricks."

Pretty soon it got dark. And when supper was over we played tag in the big lower hall. Then, at ten o'clock, we banked the fire and turned in.

"Remember," says Aunt Polly, as she and Tail Light mounted the stairs together, "if you behave yourselves to-night it will be pancakes for breakfast. But if you don't behave it will be mush."

And then, the four of us having gathered in my room to complete our plans, we sat down, fully dressed, and waited for the Zero Hour, which, as you probably know, is the time set by military leaders for a planned attack.

CHAPTER XV

THE SACRED PIG

October 19 (*Continued*)—Slats peeped into the clothes closet.

"Where's that secret door," says he, "that you've been yapping about?"

"You're looking straight at it," says I.

"All I see is a panel," says he.

"Well," says I, "that's it."

He tried to poke a knife-blade into the crack.

"Boy," says he, "the carpenter who fitted this door certainly knew his augers."

"I never would have known that it was there," admitted Randall, as we all gathered around the closet, "if the wind hadn't blown it open the day we got here. Since then I've been through it a dozen times. Nor did it ever latch on me till last night."

The secret door sort of fascinated Slats, who is never so happy as when he's tinkering with an old clock or some other piece of machinery.

"Let's look around," says he eagerly, as he

further felt of the closet walls, "and see if we can't find a hidden spring."

"Help yourself," says Randall, whose own efforts to open the door had failed.

A house like that gives a fellow queer ideas.

"Do you suppose," I then advanced the rather startling theory, as Slats stopped work to remove a sliver from under his finger-nail, "that there's similar secret doors in all of the closets."

"And why not?" the quick-minded young house owner promptly endorsed the idea. "Certainly that would be no stranger than some of the other stuff around here."

But why should any sane man clutter up his clothes closets with secret doors? That's what puzzled me.

"My uncle did so many queer things," says Randall, as we further discussed the purpose of the probable doors, Friday giving as his opinion that they had been built for the convenience of prowling spirit witches, "that it's hard to attach a sensible reason to his acts. Take these wall pictures for instance. They're pretty. But what normal-minded man, particularly an old bachelor, would want to decorate his home in this fashion? And why was such a freakish house built in the first place? Was it an odd whim of my uncle's? Or did he

have a hidden reason for surrounding himself with stuff like this? It's a real mystery, fellows," the speaker warmed up to his subject. "And I'd give a good deal to solve it. But the chances are that the house will rot to the ground without disclosing its secrets. For my uncle planned everything well, even to his own disappearance. *He* knew, when he went to bed that eventful night, that he was going to disappear. The fact that he had drawn his money out of the bank, in gold coins, proves it."

Slats had stopped work to listen.

"And is it your added opinion," says he, with a sort of scared look on his face, "that the angry spirit witches skinned out with him?"

"I'd hate to think that such was indeed the case," came the grave reply. "For it's contrary to Aunt Polly's religious teachings. But I can't deny that strange things have happened here. And there may be more truth to the 'spirit-witch' theory than my practical guardian is willing to admit."

"I sometimes wonder," Friday then dished out a theory as imaginative as my own, "if that big white pig wasn't a spirit witch in disguise."

"I think myself," agreed Randall, with a thoughtful nod, "that the peculiar pig had something to do with my uncle's queer religion.

Otherwise, why did he keep the pig in the house?"

"The servants told the story," says I, drawing on my memory, "that he kept the pig near him for protection."

Here we turned as Tail Light came into the room carrying a club as big as a young wagon tongue.

"Well," says he, posing sort of courageous-like, "when do we start?"

The little tyke!

"I thought I told you to stay in bed," says I, "till we called you."

"I was afraid you might forget me," he grinned.

"No danger of that," says I. "For we've built our whole campaign around you."

"Hot dog!" says he, with dancing eyes.

I then motioned to Randall, who was on the lookout for possible spies.

"Close the door," says I, "and tell him all about it."

"Yes," urged Tail Light, as he dropped down beside me on the edge of the bed, "let's hear it. For I'm anxious to find out where I come in."

"To all appearances," Randall then began, having joined us on the edge of the bed, "you're sound asleep."

"Where?" came the quick inquiry. "Here?"

"No; in your own room."

"Oh, gee!" a wave of disappointment swept over the speaker's spotted face. "You aren't trying to leave me out of it, are you?"

"We will," I threatened, with a playful swing at his nose, "if you don't quit interrupting and do as you're told."

Randall then proceeded with the plan of battle.

"Fearful of a surprise attack, Tony and his gang, notwithstanding their earlier brags, have locked themselves in the leader's room. And there they'll stay till morning if we don't outwit them. At first we thought of loading up the big fly sprayer with that green itch medicine of Doc's and stinking them out. But the only way we could get stuff into their room is through the keyhole or under the door. And they could easily put a stop to that. So we finally decided to go down cellar. All four of us. See? And having parked ourselves under their room we're going to talk loud enough for them to hear us. Suspecting some kind of a trick, they'll listen like mice. And right then is when we're going to throw them off their guard. More than that, we're going to let on that we're down there digging up the long-lost fortune. Boy, the fun we can have talking

about it! Pretty soon they'll want to see what we're doing. But too wise to be tricked (so he thinks!), Tony, of course, will send out a scout, whose chief instructions will be to find out where *you* are. For you're the only one on our side who isn't in the cellar. Here's the key to the cellar door. Keep it in bed with you. And take your own door key out of the lock, otherwise, having taken a guarded peek at you, the scout might be bright enough to lock you in your room. It's the spy's report that you're sound asleep. Which satisfies Tony and his gang that the coast is clear. Leaving their room they'll tiptoe to the cellar door, hoping to get a peek at us from the cellar stairs. Nor will it occur to them that it's necessary to station a guard in the kitchen, where, as you know, the door opens into the cellar. Watching from the upper hall, you can easily follow them without showing yourself. And it will be *your* job to close and *lock* the cellar door, after which we'll do the rest."

Tail Light's eyes made me think of shiny gooseberries.

"What are you going to fight with?" says he eagerly.

"Cobs and old pine cones."

"Boy, I wish I was going to be there to help you!"

"By staging the battle in the cellar," Randall added, "Aunt Polly will never know anything about it."

"But how long do I keep the door locked?"

"Till we signal to you to open it."

Making sure that the coast was clear, Tail Light then hurried back to his room. We heard him remove his door key as instructed. Then everything was silent.

Our light having been turned out, we waited for another ten minutes, all tiptoeing across the room when old Charley passed our window on another one of his trips around the moonlit house, then started single file for the cellar.

"We certainly were lucky to find that old map," hissed Friday, as we paused briefly in the hall within a few feet of opposing leader's door.

"*And* how," I hissed in pattern.

"Boy, I bet Tony Crooker's eyes will pop out to-morrow morning when he learns that we dug up the long-lost treasure while he was asleep."

"I knew blamed well," Randall then put in, "that he'd lock himself in his room, thus enabling us to dig up the treasure undisturbed, if we let on that we were going to pick a fight with him."

"Sh-h-h-h!" I cautioned. "Don't talk too

loud. For he might wake up yet and surprise us."

After which we hurried on down the hall, hopeful, of course, that our planned gab had been overheard.

Aunt Polly's canary gave a few pleased peeps as we turned on the kitchen light. And fearful that the bird would burst into song, thus drawing its owner's attention, we quickly covered the cage with a dish towel.

"How about stopping in the pantry?" says Friday, sort of hungry-like.

"Do your work first," says I, "and eat afterwards."

A cool musty smell came out of the cellar when the door was opened. It made me think of a tomb. And was it ever dark down there! Br-r-r-r!

"Let there be light and there was light," says Randall, as he turned the switch, after which we passed single file down the dusty cob-webby stairs.

"There's the pine cones that I told you about," says the leader, as we stopped beside a big wooden box at the foot of the stairs.

"Who gathered them?" says I curiously.

"Aunt Polly. She says they're swell for kindling fires. And there's the cob bin," he further pointed.

Few cellars are well lighted. And this one, having nothing but old-fashioned bulbs in the lighting circuit, was full of dark shadowy corners.

"Let's keep together," says I, kind of shivery-like, as I got in between Friday and Slats.

Then did I ever scream, and the others with me, when a huge rat scooted across our feet.

"Well," says Randall, stopping under the enemy's room, "here we are."

"Who's going to do the digging?" says I.

"We'll take turns," says Slats.

"I'll start," says Friday.

"Let's check up first," says Randall, "and make sure that we've got the right spot."

"Fifteen feet from the north wall," says I.

"And twenty-two feet from the east wall," says Slats.

"Is that what it says on the map?" says Friday.

"Sure thing," says Randall.

"I think you better look closer," says Friday, "for the map is old and faded."

There was more such talk, after which we pretended that we were digging a hole.

"Boy," panted Friday, as he scraped the surface of the dirt floor with a stick, "this sure is hard work."

"Don't wear yourself out," says I.

"How deep do we have to dig?" says Friday.

"Four feet," says Randall.

"Does the map say how the gold was put away?" Friday further quizzed.

"Sure thing," says Randall. "It was buried in an old iron kettle."

"A kettleful of gold! Gee!"

Here I banged two rocks together.

"What was that?" says I, sort of excited-like. "Did you strike something hard?"

"Nothing else but," says Friday.

And so we kept it up, wondering, as the silence continued over our heads, if Tony and his gang had actually gone to sleep.

Then we were reassured by the faint creaking of a loose floor board.

"Hot dog!" breathed Randall, as he squeezed our hands in turn. "They're all tiptoeing down the hall."

Yes sir, as the saying is, the enemy had swallowed our bait, hook line and sinker. Nor was it long before we got Tail Light's signal, though, if I must tell you the truth, he sounded a blamed sight more like a sick calf than a real owl. But that was all right.

Realizing now that he and his gang had been tricked (and how it hurt!), Tony made a jump for the cellar door. But he didn't get there quite soon enough! And was he ever furious

when we started taunting him from the foot of the stairs! Oh, boy!

"What's the matter, Honey-bunch?" I inquired sweetly. "Did your curiosity get the best of you?"

"Oh, shut up!" he blatted, giving me a hateful look.

"Let's show him the deep hole that we dug," says Friday.

"A potfull of gold," jeered Randall. "Haw! haw! haw!"

Finding himself cornered, Tony bounded down the stairs.

"Come on, gang," he bellowed to his sick-looking warriors. "If it's a fight they want, let's make it so blamed hot for them that they'll be only too glad to call quits."

After which, both sides having stocked up with ammunition, the battle began.

"Lay to it, gang," boomed Tony, as he slam-banged the cobs and pine cones in our direction. "That's it—aim for their heads. Boy, I gave one of them a beautiful crack that time! Hear him blat!"

Then, as he got a sock in his own bread basket, over he went in a yapping heap.

"How do you like that one?" bellowed Friday, who, together with Randall and Slats, was nicely barricaded behind a row of old potato

barrels. I suppose I should have been there myself. But having foolishly parked myself behind a wash boiler, I had to stay there. And did the old boiler ever snort as the enemy bombarded it in its tin stomach.

Bang! *Bang!* BANG! That's the way it sounded. While on the other side of the cellar, a wash tub that one of the enemy had turned up for protection was dishing out much the same kind of music.

"Now, gang, altogether," Tony boomed at his warriors. "Give 'em the best you've got. And make it hot."

"Ouch!" squawked Bloody Bill, as we got in an equally effective return shot.

After which the cobs and pine cones flew faster than ever. Gee! It sure was bully. And having found out that they could hold their own, Tony and his gang were getting as much fun out of it as us.

Then, a stray missile having shattered one of the unprotected electric-light bulbs, thus throwing the whole lower circuit out of commission, the cellar was plunged into inky darkness.

Gosh! That took all the fight out of *me.*

One of my groping hands suddenly encountered a wad of hair.

"Who is it?" says I, with fast-beating heart.

"Me," says Friday

Here Tail Light unlocked the upper door, telling us, as we all made a break for the now lighted stairs, that he had heard a ghost on the back porch. Scared out of their wits, the Crookers beat it down the hall, where they all piled into one bed and covered up their heads. But the rest of us stopped in the kitchen where Tail Light told us a strange story of gliding footfalls and a creaking doorknob.

"Of course," he wound up, as we stood around him with startled faces, "I don't *know* that it was a ghost. But it sounded like one. Anyway, I heard something. And whatever it was it tried to sneak into the house."

Here a shot rang out. And when I tell you that I almost jumped out of my skin I want you to believe me. Boy, I never suffered such a scare in all my life! Then, on the heels of the thunderous report, we heard a queer strangling scream, following which old Charley tumbled up the porch steps, begging us, as he beat on the locked door with his bare hairy fists, to let him in.

It was Slats, I think, who opened the door. Anyway, he was the first one to speak.

"What's the matter?" he inquired, in a shaky voice, as the wild-eyed guard tumbled

gunless into the room. "What did you shoot at?"

I thought for a moment or two, as I stared at the panic-stricken old man, that he had completely lost his voice. His lips moved. So did his tongue. But no words came.

"What's the matter?" Slats repeated. "Tell us, so that we can help you."

"Yes," Randall gave the stooped shoulders a vigorous shake. "Tell us what you shot at."

That broke the spell.

"It was ol' Zeno Giblin," the words came slowly. "I saw him jump into the bushes. An' when I shot him, jest as I tol' him I would if he ever come back to haunt me, he screamed. A devil! That's what *he* was. An' I knowed it, too. Fearful that he'd do harm here, as he intended, I've bin watchin' the place ever since Miss Polly moved in. You kin see now what fiendish power them spirit witches has. Fur Zeno Giblin's one of 'em. An' havin' come back once he'll come ag'in. Like as not he'll bring that devilish pig, too. That's why I'm warnin' you now to git out of here. If you don't, you're doomed."

I drew away from the open door. But Slats, who seemed to have more courage than the rest of us, stepped outside. I heard him give a startled cry. And when my curiosity

drew me back, there he was on his knees beside a basket, in which, curled up on a baby blanket, was a small spotted pig.

Boy, right then is when I quit thinking! Until now I had clung to the belief that there was no such thing as a real ghost. I had wavered at times, as I have written down. But a certain sensible doubt had always stood up in my mind.

Now, though, all doubt was removed. There *was* such a thing as a ghost. And it was the ghost of old Zeno Giblin who had brought this sleeping pig here as a part of some incomprehensible fiendish scheme to put us all out of business.

Randall crowded me onto the porch.

"What's in it?" says he, when Slats tore open an envelope that he had found in the basket. "Money?"

"No," came the slow wondering reply, "nothing but a note."

And then, as we further gathered around the bewildered leader, this is what he read:

> I beg of you to shield and protect my little precious until such time as I am able to call for him, for he is sacred to me.

A sacred pig! What, I asked myself, as my fear of the pig deepened, would happen next?

CHAPTER XVI

OLD CHARLEY'S STRANGE STORY

October 19 (*Continued*)—I still couldn't figure out whether old Zeno's peculiar interest in pigs (as evidenced by his choice of a bodyguard and the wall decorations in his own bedchamber) had come about through his meat-cutting activities, or whether the more deeply-rooted interest had influenced him in the beginning to take up that particular line of business.

But it was plain to be seen by this latest ghostly move of his, that he *did* have an overwhelming interest and probably an equally overwhelming confidence in pigs. He knew how to use them, as a sorcerer uses charms of various kinds, to gain his own evil ends. Which sounds kind of deep. But I guess you'll be able to figure out what I mean.

A sacred pig! One time in Sunday school our teacher told us about a sacred calf. It was an idol. The Hebrews worshipped it.

And I wondered now, as I further looked down at the strange sleeping pig, if it, too, was an idol. Were we supposed to worship it, thus bringing about our own planned destruction? And had the retired butcher similarly worshipped the white pig ahead of us?

Gosh! I was crammed full of shivers now. And satisfied that the sleeping pig had been brought here to put us out of business, in some mysterious unknown way, I refused to let Randall touch it.

"Leave it alone!" I screamed, pulling him back. "For it's a spirit witch."

He acted kind of peeved.

"For the love of mud!" says he, when he recovered his voice. "Why don't you scare the wits out of a guy?"

"You'll get something worse than a scare," I further shivered, "if you ever touch it."

"Bunk!" says he shortly.

Attracted to the porch by our excited gab, old Charley stopped beside the basket and looked down at the sleeping occupant with wondering eyes.

"A pig!" says he, in a peculiar bewildered voice. "Another pig!"

"It was left here by that ghost of yours," informed Slats.

"A pig!" the bewildered old man repeated, in the same wondering way. "Another pig!"

"Did you see the ghost when he put the basket on the porch?" quizzed Slats.

"No," the speaker shook his shaggy head.

Told then that a note had been found in the basket he seemed peculiarly eager to see it.

"Is it the butcher's handwriting?" Slats further quizzed, determined if possible to clear up the mystery.

"I—I don't think so," came the bewildered reply. "It looks more like a woman's handwriting to me."

Slats gave his head an expressive bob.

"That's exactly what I thought," says he shortly. Then he turned and beckoned to Randall. "Come on," says he, with a sort of business-like swing to his voice, as he headed for the clump of bushes into which the ghost had jumped at the sight of the approaching guard. "Let's do some investigating."

I dare say they weren't gone more than three or four minutes. But it seemed like an age to me. And I sort of marveled at their safe return.

Slats carried a black felt hat.

"No wonder your ghost screeched," he told old Charley. "For you shot him through the

top of his hat. See? And very probably you took out some hair, too."

The old man acted more bewildered than ever.

"Whar did you find it?" he inquired, as he nervously fingered the ruined hat.

"In the bushes."

Ghosts, of course, have just as much right to wear hats as anybody else. But, as Slats now pointed out (thus letting me down with a thump!), it *was* rather odd to say the least that the butcher's ghost had been wearing a hat with a current price tag in it.

The "ghost" theory having thus been exploded, old Charley got up on his ear.

"Gol-ding!" he steamed, as he glared at the still sleeping pig. "Do you s'pose that animule was brought here by some trickster?"

Slats took another peek at the note.

"I still believe," says he, with a puzzled look on his face, "that it was written by a woman. Yet," he pointed, "that's a man's hat."

"An' it was a man what I shot at, too," waggled the equally puzzled guard.

"But what made you think it was old Zeno's ghost?" came the natural query.

"Wa-al," shrugged old Charley, sort of embarrassed-like, as he picked up his shotgun at

the foot of the porch steps, "it looked like him."

"And were you really expecting to see him?" came the further puzzled query.

The old man pondered before replying. And as I watched him, with fast-beating heart, wondering what his answer would be, I was struck by the drawn look on his wrinkled face.

"I not only *expected* to see him," he finally spoke in a weary voice, acting for all the world as though he was about to collapse under the burden of his secrets, "but I've been fearful of what would happen when I *did* see him. Fur he had made his brags. And I knew how he hated that sister of his'n."

"Then you actually believe," Slats pinned the old spiritualist down, "that he can come back from the grave?"

There was another expressive shrug.

"He said he'd come back."

"When did he tell you that?"

"The night me an' him fell out."

Here we all stepped back as the little pig awakened and jumped squealing out of the basket. Gee! I knew now that he wasn't a spirit witch. But I was still kind of scared of him.

Finding himself in a strange place he ran frantically from one end of the moonlit porch

to the other, smelling of our shoes between squeals and looking up at us sort of begging-like.

"Let's feed him," says Friday.

So we took him into the kitchen and mixed up a gob of cornflakes for him. And did he ever wade into it! Oh, baby!

Having emptied the bowl he sat up, like a trained dog, and begged for more. Certainly, I told myself as I watched him, he was no common pig. And plainly he had been brought here for some unknown secret purpose.

Old Charley put a new shell into his gun.

"I was fooled once," says he grimly, "but I won't be fooled ag'in."

Then, as he started for the door, Slats stepped in front of him.

"Instead of protecting us with a shotgun, Mr. Robin, don't you think you ought to tell us what you know about the secrets of this old house and thus enable us to protect ourselves? If it's true, as you say, that Zeno Giblin was a devil, why continue to keep his secrets? It's putting us in danger. Besides, it's going to go hard with you if you shoot an innocent party. You thought you were shooting at a ghost to-night. But you know now that it wasn't a ghost. It may have been a

trickster, as you say. But I'm more inclined to believe that it's some one who wants to get us out of here. And if that is the case, you may get plugged yourself. So it will pay you to work with us and let us work with you."

Here we all looked down at the little pig, who was trying to stand on his head.

"Don't you see what we're up against, Mr. Robin?" there was a peculiar awed note in Slats' added plea. "That's no ordinary pig. It's a trained pig. Some one who knows the history of this house is trying to scare us out of here."

A trained pig! Or, if we were to believe the peculiar note, a sacred pig! What *could* it mean, I asked myself, with mounting bewilderment.

And all the time there was a steady procession of icy shivers in the region of my backbone.

> I beg of you to shield and protect my little precious until such time as I am able to call for him, for he is sacred to me.

An anxious mother might have written such a note about her baby. But nobody but a fool, or a scheming trickster, would write such a note about a pig. And what if we disregarded

the appealing note and kicked the pig out of the house? What would happen then?

Boy, it sure was *some* riddle, I concluded, wondering if the unknown writer of the strange note really intended to claim the pig later on.

Old Charley sat down with a worried look.

"I—I kind of hate to talk about this," he spoke slowly, the expression in his deep-set eyes suggesting to me that he was looking down the long chain of years that connected his boyhood with his old age, "fur I sometimes have the feelin' that I've made a mess of my life. My mother didn't *want* me to be a spiritualist. An' even now when she comes back to me she begs me to give it up. It hain't right, she says, fur human beings to penetrate the secrets that lie beyond the grave. But it mystifies me. It always has. An' I reckon I'll be a spiritualist to the end. But I hain't defendin' it. As I say, I sometimes wonder if my mother's religion wouldn't have made me happier."

We waited for him to go on.

"I was born in Ohio," he then went back to the beginning of his story. "Zeno Giblin an' me went to the same country school an' grew up on adjoinin' farms. An uncle havin' interested me in spiritualism—he could move a table all over the room by jest touchin' his

fingers to it—I later talked Zeno into joinin' the spiritualistic church. His folks didn't like that, any more than did my mother. So, to escape bein' nagged at—we were young an' independent in them days—we finally run away from home. Havin' settled here in Crocketville, Zeno hired out to a butcher an' in time opened a meat market of his own. That's when he lived by me on the river bank. Night after night we'd sit together in the dark waitin' fur the right kind of spirit vibrations. An' often strange things happened. Then Zeno's belief began to take queer turns. I caught him readin' books on witchcraft. He talked of spirit witches, too. They could work miracles, he said. An' one night they *did* work a miracle, though, until then, I hadn't given much serious consideration to his talk. That was the night he got his money. A spirit witch brung it in a black trunk, which later was burned up. It was a moonlight night. I had bin asleep. A touch of spirit hands woke me up. It was midnight. An' when I went to the window I saw the spirit witch open and close Zeno's gate. The next day I tackled him about it. 'Who was it,' says I, 'who stopped at your house last night with a black trunk?' He acted as though he was goin' to faint. Then he got hisself under control. 'That,' says he, 'was a

spirit witch.' 'It looked like a man to me,' says I. 'No,' says he, shakin' his head, 'it was a spirit witch.' Nor could he long keep his good fortune to hisself. 'Charley,' says he, 'do you remember what I told you about the spirit witches?' 'What?' says I. 'I said they could work miracles.' 'Well, what of it?' says I. An' then is when he took me into his bedroom an' showed me the trunkful of money. 'There's proof,' says he. 'Proof of what?' says I, staring at the money. 'Proof,' says he, 'that the spirit witches kin work miracles.' 'Whar did you git this money?' says I, suddenly sickened by the thought that he had bin stealin'. 'That's the miracle,' says he. 'A spirit witch brung it to me.' I didn't believe him at first. But I believe him now. He *did* git that money from the spirit witches. But what *he* gave in return was his own soul. An' the devil got it. His money never did him any good. He built this big place, turnin' his old home over to the town fur hospital purposes. But he wasn't happy here. He was constantly afraid of something. He had fear in his manner an' fear in his heart. It wasn't a comfort to be with him any more. Fur all he could talk about was them spirit witches. He got me confused. An' to this day I don't know whether I believe in *spirits* or *spirit witches.*

But I'd never sell my soul to the devil like *he* did. No, sir-ee! One day he brung me that sword, like I tol' you. It was a talisman, he said. An' if I'd put it over my door it would protect both of us. Whar he got the sword I don't know. But I reckon it come from the same place as his money. One night we had a quarrel. I tol' him outright that his added belief was a sin. An' then is when he tol' me, in a rage, that he'd come back an' haunt me if I ever disclosed the source of his wealth. 'Who's goin' to git your wealth when you die?' says I. 'Your family?' 'If they ever touch a penny of mine,' says he, 'I'll haunt them too. Fur I hate them. They kicked me out. An' I wouldn't help them if they were starvin', least of all my sister Polly.' So you kin see how scared I was when Miss Polly come here to live. I was afraid he *would* come back an' do her harm. That's why I hung around here. An' that's why I got this job, havin' further buried the sword in the path fur her added protection."

And there he stopped.

"But you haven't told us yet where my uncle disappeared to," Randall prompted quickly.

"Why! . . ." the speaker stared. "I thought you know. It was them spirit witches, of course. When it come time fur him to go

they jest naturally nabbed him an' carried him off."

"And you really believe that?" Randall's voice was skeptical.

"Of course."

Nor was the old man putting on either. He *did* believe it, as his manner showed.

Slats then swung in.

"Do you mind if I ask you a few questions, Mr. Robin?"

"Go ahead," the old man consented.

"How much money did the spirit witches bring Randall's uncle?"

"I don't know."

"He never told you?"

"No."

"Do you think there was a million dollars in the trunk?"

"It looked like that much to me."

"Was it paper money?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure it wasn't counterfeit money?"

"That's a silly question. Fur no bank would have accepted the money if it was counterfeit."

"What was the butcher's idea in building such a queer house?"

"I don't know fur sure. But I think he did it to occupy his troubled mind."

"Then you're quite sure that the spirit witches didn't order him to build it?"

"They may have," the speaker conceded.

"Did he ever tell you why he decorated the rooms with Mother Goose pictures?"

"No."

"Did you ever ask him?"

"No."

"Then you have no idea why he decorated the walls of his own bedroom with pictures of pigs?"

"No."

"But you *do* know why he kept that big white pig in the house?" came the crafty question.

"No," the single word was spoken for the fourth time.

"Did you ever see the pig after the butcher disappeared?"

"Not alive. But I saw its spirit."

"Where?"

"Under the pine trees in the front yard."

"And is that all you can tell us?" Slats was noticeably disappointed.

"I thought I was tellin' you a lot," the old man raised his eyes.

"How about the butcher's money? Did that go back to spiritland, too?"

"So I believe."

"And do you further believe that the spirit witches carried off the pig?"

The old man nodded.

"Then you never tried to find the money?" pressed Slats.

"No."

"But what were you doing here the night you saw the pig's ghost?"

"Jest passin' by."

"Other people have searched for the missing money," came the pointed reminder.

"I know it. But I figured it was a waste of time."

"Did the butcher ever account to you for the constantly frightened look on his face?"

"He didn't have to, fur I knew why he was frightened. Havin' sold his soul to the devil, he knew that the imp of darkness would sooner or later collect his just dues. An' he did."

"Then you weren't surprised when the butcher came up missing?"

"No."

"Have you ever talked with the butcher in spirit form?"

"No."

"Nor seen him in spirit form?"

"No."

"Then how do you know he's dead?" came the startling question.

The old man was staring now.

"You hain't thinkin', be you," says he, with frightened eyes, "that it was ol' Zeno hisself that I shot at to-night?"

"It could be," nodded Slats.

"I swan!" came the exhausted exclamation.

Poor old Charley! His ideas for the most part were cuckoo. But we didn't argue with him, or try to change his views on spiritualism. He had been that way for many years. And probably, as he had said, he'd be that way to the end.

And now I'm going to write down in the next chapter how we dug up a skeleton in the cellar of the old pest house. Which proved Randall's amazing theory that it was a *man* who carried the mysterious laden trunk on his back, and not a spirit witch, as the simple-minded old guard suspected.

CHAPTER XVII

THE UNCOVERED SKELETON

October 19 (*Continued*)—Old Charley had gone back to his job. We could see him at intervals as he passed the kitchen window. Once he stopped at the back door to get a drink, telling us, as he fished his false teeth out of the cup, that he had seen a pair of eyes in the bushes. But he had sensibly refrained from shooting.

Could it be true, I pondered, as we completed our plans, the little pig in the meantime having returned to its bed, that the butcher was still alive? And anticipating a situation like this, had he provided the probable secret doors for his own crafty use?

But where had he been all these intervening years? And what had prompted him to skin out in the first place, loaded down with his own money? Had the probable crime that he committed that night in the lonely house on the river bank upset his mind? Was this the cause

of his constant fright? And had he talked of miracles purely to deceive his inquisitive friend? Or did he actually believe in spirit witches?

An accusing conscience has wrecked more than one evil-doer's brain. But here was a case in which an accusing conscience had driven a man to building a freakish house. He had done it, old Charley had said, to occupy a troubled mind. And what is a troubled mind but a troubled conscience?

The greedy butcher had sold himself to the devil, all right. But not in the way old Charley thought. And to prove it we now collected the necessary digging tools and started for the ruins of the old pest house, satisfied that if the mysterious man with the trunk *had* been put out of the way, as we suspected, the body very probably would be found in the cellar floor. For that's the first place that evil-doers and misers seem to think of when they have something to bury.

If old Charley hadn't been so guileless, or whatever you call it, he would have suspected the truth about that mysterious midnight visitor, who closed the moonlit gate behind him and never opened it again. But some men are like putty in other men's hands. And so it was with our warty-necked old friend. He had

been told that the man with the black trunk was a spirit witch. And he believed it! But the crafty evil-doer knew that the neighbors as a whole wouldn't believe it. So he had cleverly sealed his trusting friend's lips. "If you ever disclose the source of my wealth I'll come back and haunt you." That's the way he worked it. And poor old Charley, a believer in spirits himself, and always ready to oblige, had innocently kept silent throughout the following years.

Go back and read his story, as I wrote it down in the preceding chapter, and you'll see plainly why the butcher had "almost fainted" when questioned about his mysterious midnight visitor. You'll understand, too, why the incriminating black trunk had been "burned up." But did the unworthy butcher, now a man of great wealth, say anything about the still cold form in the cellar floor? Oh, no! And having been talked into believing that the observed visitor was a spirit witch, old Charley had drawn the simple conclusion that the trunk carrier, his duties completed, had vanished spirit-like into thin air.

Stationing himself at the front door, Tail Light signaled to us when the guard came into sight. And having escaped safely through the

back door, we lit out in the moonlight for the ruins of Zeno Giblin's old home.

Randall, I noticed, was peculiarly thoughtful.

"What's the matter?" says I, as I fell into step with him.

"Please don't tell the others," says he in a low voice. "But I think I know who the trunk carrier was."

"Tell me," says I eagerly.

"No," he shook his head. "I won't give you his name now. But I will if we find a body with only one thumb."

Arriving at the yawning cellar, and more thankful than words can tell that the rubbish had been carried off by the local junk man, we set to work, aided by the penetrating moonlight, and constantly unnerved by the feeling that eyes we couldn't see were covertly watching us.

Was it old Zeno himself? I wondered, as the shivers further played havoc with my backbone. And I wondered again where he had been all these years. Could it be, I asked myself, that he had been living secretly in the old house? Did that explain the creeping sounds that Aunt Polly had heard?

He *could* have written that note. For it's no particular trick for a clever man to disguise his handwriting. But somehow the note

sounded like a woman. And I found myself wondering, as the other fellows set to work with a pick and shovel, if the strange-acting hider had a female companion.

But, unless they both were cuckoo, what could be their motive, I pondered, in leaving that funny little pig at our back door? And why had they taken up this hidden secretive life? And, what had become of the white pig?

Determined now to call up my folks as soon as I got back to the pest house, and hoping, too, that I'd find Tail Light safe and sound, I started a hole under what used to be the old cellar stairs. Nor had I gone a foot into the earthen floor before I struck something solid.

It was a box—a plain board box, now rotten with age. And when we completely uncovered it, and raised the lid, there lay a human skeleton, the bones of which were still protected by fragments of cloth.

We didn't do much talking. For my own part I was too scared to talk. Somehow I had the shivery feeling that the hidden venomous eyes were now very close to us. I even feared an attack. But this, I guess, was all imagination. For nothing happened.

Randall stooped and examined the boney right hand. Then he looked straight at me.

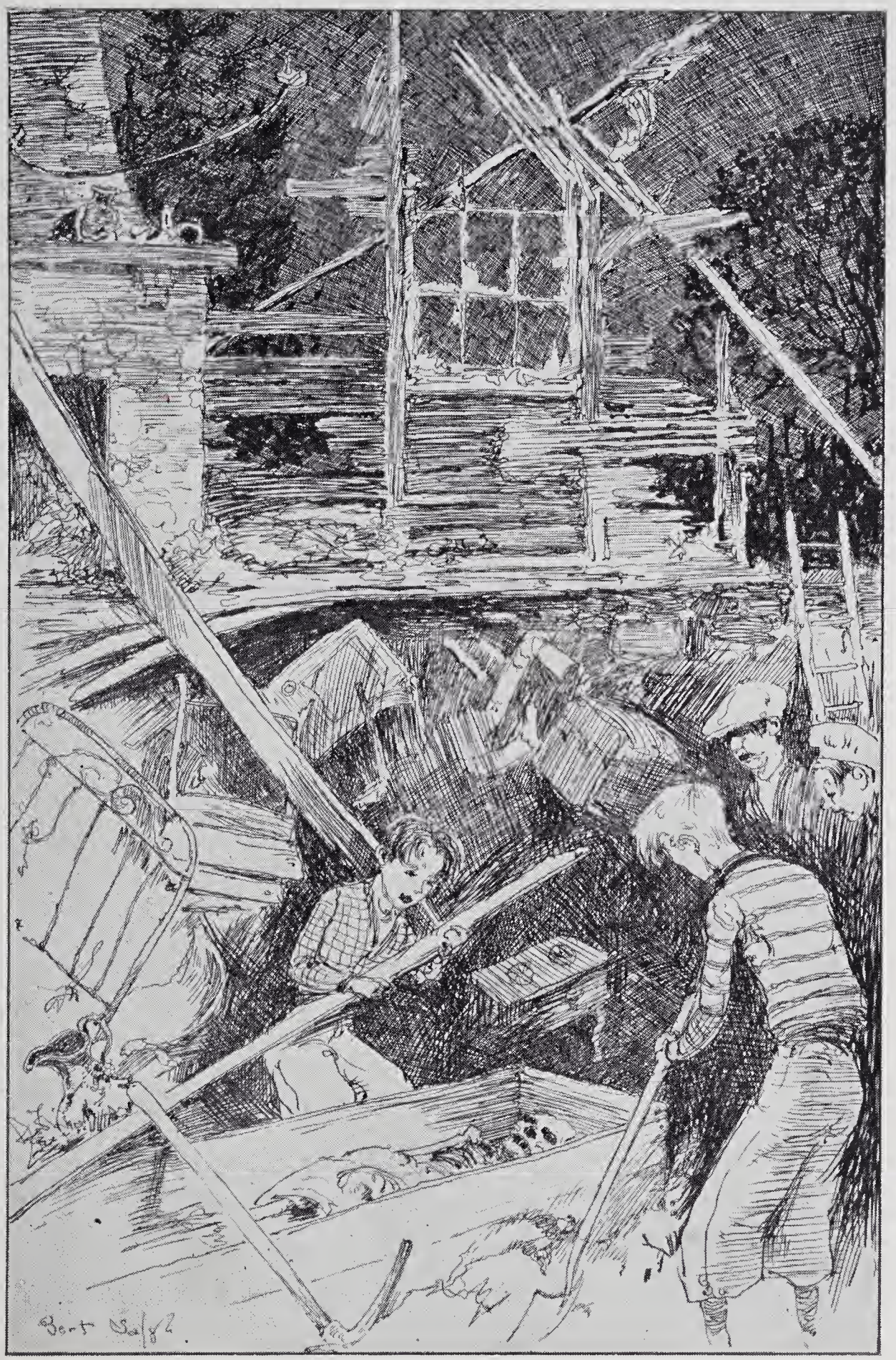
"I guessed right," says he quietly.

"Who is it?" says I, sort of panting-like.

"My uncle Harry. He went to Alaska to hunt for gold. And it was generally concluded that he died there. But instead he died in this house, at the hands of his evil brother, though why he came here in the dead of night with a trunkful of money on his back is more than I can figure out."

Having found the incriminating skeleton, there was nothing more for us to do except to sound the alarm. So we hurried back to the new pest house, intending to call up the sheriff as soon as we got there.

And now comes the part about the old well. Br-r-r-r!



"I WAS TOO SCARED TO TALK."

Trigger Berg And The Sacred Pig. *Page 215.*

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SECRET OF THE OLD WELL

October 19 (*Continued*)—I know now that the moon likes boys and wants to protect them. For it cheerfully tagged us all the way home, sort of grinning back at us with its big round face every time we peeked up at it. And were we ever grateful for its penetrating white light! Oh, boy! Had darkness suddenly overtaken us, thus allowing the owner of those venomous hidden eyes to creep up on us, I actually believe that we would have turned inside-out.

Yet, with all of our shivers, which were a-plenty, we felt pretty big. For we had succeeded where the experienced older detectives had fizzled. Not that we had completely cleared up the mystery. But we knew now where old Zeno had gotten his money. Investigation of the skeleton probably would reveal other important facts. Nor was it improbable that old

Zeno himself would soon land in the Crocketville cooler.

Then, of course, the newspapers all over the country would pick up the story. Reporters would come dashing into town on high gear to get the facts of the case, like the time old Mrs. Perkins coughed up a ten-foot tapeworm. It really wasn't ten feet long till the ambitious reporters stretched it out. But that was all right. It looked beautiful when photographed. Just like a big noodle. Which reminded me that very probably we'd be photographed, too. "Trigger Berg and his trusty gang." Such would read the line under the printed picture. Not that I was entitled to any more credit than my pals. But having written two books, the second of which would soon be on sale, the newspapers naturally would want to mention me first.

And how lovely, was my added thought, as I hurried along in the moonlight, if the town got up a parade in our honor. First would come the mayor astride a milk-white horse wearing a plumed hat—meaning the mayor, of course, and not the milk-white horse. Then would come the Crocketville band. Then the four young heroes themselves riding in state in an open cab. After that, in order, would come the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, the dif-

ferent fraternal organizations, and finally the Rag Alley baseball nine of which Friday used to be the mascot before he had his tonsils cut out.

As the cheers arose along the line of march I'd rise from my seat, bowing with proper dignity. And people who hitherto had regarded me as just another kid with a dirty nose would nudge each other and say: "Yes, that's him!" My great moment, so to speak. Certainly it *would* be a great moment if I got a chance to turn up my nose at Betty Sharpe. The little snip! Now that I was a hero she'd probably try to hang around me. But little good it would do her. For I wasn't going to let a mere woman wreck my career like that Samson fellow in the Bible.

Having told Tail Light to wait for us in the kitchen, we looked for a light. And there it was! So we gave the prearranged signal, consisting of three long hoots and two short ones. But instead of gaining admittance we brought old Charley on the scene, which sent us scooting in four different directions.

I don't know why the old gilly took after me. But he did, roaring at me to stop. And scared to death that I'd get a charge of buckshot in my legs, I ran like a deer. I was in an unfrequented part of the grounds now. Ahead of

me was a blackberry thicket. And hopeful that I could hide here till my lumbering pursuer passed, I literally hurdled the fringing bushes, expecting, of course, that I'd get a few scratches in landing. But to my horror I didn't land! I kept on going! Down, down, down!

I had vaulted into an old dry well!

This was a blamed sight worse than being caught. So I screamed for help, hoping, of course, as I gingerly twiddled my arms and legs to see if they were intact, that the persistent guard would hear me. But the well's cold stone walls seemed to absorb my voice like a sponge.

Having landed on an old crate of some kind, I had an awful pain in my stomach, which grew worse as the minutes passed. My nose was bleeding, too. And it was hard work for me to keep the tears back. But I didn't want it said of me afterwards that I was a cry-baby. So I blinked hard and stiffened myself like a poker. It did the work, too.

Yelling till I was hoarse, I finally sat down on the queer rib-like crate to wait for daybreak, confident that my chums would then come to my rescue. Nor could I get the thought out of my head that this was my just punishment for telling Doc Fosse that fib.

Pretty soon I heard a sound overhead. And something told me that it wasn't a human sound. Patter! Patter! Patter! It was hoofs of some sort.

Naturally I thought of the white pig. And I don't mind telling you that I was scared stiff. But a familiar blat reassured me. It was Dynamite!

The newcomer smelt me, I guess. And realizing that I was in trouble of some sort, he sort of hung around to comfort me. Gee! I never thought I'd love a goat. But that's the way I felt toward him now, so grateful was I for his company.

Having made his escape from the barn in town, he'd quickly attract my chums' attention when they set out to look for me. So the thing to do, I wisely told myself, as I further gritted my teeth to kill the pain in my stomach, was to keep him near me, thus assuring my own rescue.

"Nice old Dynamite!" says I, in a shaky voice. "Good old Dynamite!"

"Baa-a-a!" says he in return.

Then did I ever screech as his two front feet slid over the edge. Gosh! I *would* be a mess if he fell on top of me.

After what seemed an age to me a factory whistle blew in the distance. Could it be, I

wondered, as I looked up at the still visible stars, that it was breakfast time?

Then, to my great joy, I heard my pa's voice.

"I see a goat in there," says he, his words suggesting to me that he was peeking into the briary thicket.

"Maybe it's Dynamite," says Friday.

"It *is* Dynamite," says Slats.

After which, as you can imagine, I screeched to beat the cars.

My pa gave a glad cry.

"Where are you, Trigger?"

"In an old well," I cried in return.

Beating down the briars, they got a rope and rescued me.

"Good heavens!" says my pa, when he got a look at me. "You're covered with blood."

"I bumped my nose," says I.

"And what's the matter with your stomach?" says he, as I gave it a rub. "Did you bump that, too?"

My story of the odd-shaped crate interested Slats, who went down the rope to investigate, taking a flashlight with him. And what do you suppose he found! The thing that I had mistaken for a crate (I actually sat on it, mind you!) was *another skeleton!*

So now you know the truth about old Zeno's disappearance. Instead of being alive, as we

suspected (those hidden eyes were all imagination), he had died years ago, after a fall into the well which then contained water. The briary thicket kept people away from the well. Nor did it dry up till the past year. So it isn't at all surprising that the body had escaped detection.

Told by my excited chums that I had disappeared, my pa had hurried to the pest house, from which the scared Crookers had earlier skinned out for home. When questioned, old Charley admitted that he had chased a boy into the unfrequented berry thicket. And so my rescue was brought about as described.

October 20—Well, I know the whole story now. Randall's rich uncle wasn't put out of the way. He died of heart failure, shortly after he arrived at his brother's house. Nor did Zeno know then that the black trunk was full of paper money. The two brothers having quarreled in their youth, Zeno was afraid, if he reported the death, that he would be held responsible. So he decided to hide the body. First, though, he opened the trunk, finding it full of money, Harry Giblin, the successful prospector, having exchanged his gold nuggets for greenbacks in Seattle. Zeno told the whole

story in a document, which he then put into the quickly-made coffin with the body.

"It may be," the recovered paper read, "that my brother's body will be found after I am gone. And thus I want to establish my innocence. A letter of mine having been forwarded to him, he knew that I was living in Crocketville, and stopped to see me on his way home from Alaska. But scarcely had he stepped inside my door, after having gotten me out of bed, before he died. He's now ready for burial. Rather than share his money with my hated older brother and sisters, I intend to keep it all. As for Charley Robin, it will be an easy matter to mislead him, fool that he is, if he asks any embarrassing questions. I've always wanted to live in a house like the ones pictured in my early books. Now's my chance. Inside and outside it will be a veritable storybook house. And how the neighbors will talk! I can further mystify them by keeping a pig in the house. The butcher and his pig! Truly a great adventure lies ahead of me. And very kindly indeed have the spirit witches been to me. I even credit them with influencing my brother to stop here, when taken sick on the train. Many and varied are the ways in which they perform their miracles."

And there the paper ended.

As you can see, the pig wasn't a bodyguard at all, but a pet. And when the crazy house owner decided to take his ill-gotten money and run away, the pig went with him. Then a strange fate stepped in. Very probably the butcher, whose mind had broken down under the constant strain of his secrets and unnerving religious beliefs, thus giving him a habitual look of fear, fell into the well by accident. After him tumbled the faithful pig. And there they both died. Old Charley (who promised me to-day that he'd give up spiritualism and join the Methodist Church), had told us that he later saw the pig's ghost in the front yard. But that was just an old man's notion. The ghost theory is exciting. But it kind of shrivels up when common sense comes along and takes a crack at it. In time, Aunt Polly will have her whole house made over into a sanitarium, such being her ambition. But no one anticipates any trouble from ghosts. Yet how bitter old Zeno must be over his inability to come back from the grave. For he certainly intended to come back, if old Charley's story is to be believed. And how silly was my fear of those big pine trees.

To-night both skeletons rest in respectable coffins in the local undertaking parlor. And to-morrow there is to be a double funeral.

After that Randall will be back in school with the rest of us. For we found out early this morning that we haven't the sailors' itch at all. Gosh! When the Crookers got home last night, completely scared out of their wits, they were taken in hand by a visiting brother of Mrs. Crooker's, who is a celebrated doctor. Just what happened when he and Doc Fosse got together, I don't know. But it's generally agreed now that we were poisoned by the fertilizer sack that supplied Henrietta with a tail. My own sniffles was just a plain cold, brought about by my unexpected bath in the Baptist swimming pool.

Having been flopped into the poisoned water, Tail Light got the rash all over his body. We got it on our hands and arms from fooling around the filled tub. And the Crookers got it when they put that big carp in the tub, hoping that it would die and stink us out when we assembled in the barn for our next regular club meeting.

Doc was looking for us when we got back to the pest house this morning, after my escape from the well. And then is when he told us, after brief examination of me in which he made light of my stomach pains, that we could go home. Some people, I suppose, will says he's dumb. But we all make mistakes. And things

having happened as they did, it isn't to be wondered at that he got muddled up. To-night I'm still kind of spotted, though as peppy as ever. And I might add that I'm kind of sleepy, too.

My ma, of course, was horrified when she learned that I had been digging up skeletons and tumbling into spook wells. And to hear her tell it, she's going to keep me tied to her apron-strings for the rest of her life. But she'll soon be herself again. All mothers are like that, I guess. Maybe that's why we love them so well. Huh?

Aunt Polly had told Randall that his Uncle Harry had only one thumb. Yet the kid was mighty bright, I think, to suspect that it was his enriched uncle who had been put away in the cellar floor.

All kinds of stories are in circulation to-night about the recovered gold coins. Nor can I say exactly how much money was taken out of the well. But Aunt Polly concedes that she and Randall are rich.

Don't imagine, though, that they're going to sit down and loaf the rest of their lives. I guess not! As I say, Aunt Polly has big plans. And as Randall grows up, he'll be a great help to her. It's their sensible decision, however, not to specialize in contagious cases. So the

public health board, I dare say, will have to look elsewhere for pest-house accommodations.

Not until late this evening was the mystery of the little trained pig cleared up. But here's the dope: A circus man and his wife quarreled in a neighboring town over their baby. The mother ran off with it. Finding herself followed, she left the child on the back porch of the pest house. But when *we* got to the basket, the father, who came within an ace of getting his head shot off, had substituted one of his performing pigs. He now has both the pig and the baby. And the mother having forgiven him for his harsh words, they're both as happy as the day they were married.

Which brings me to the end of my story.

To-morrow I'm going to start a fourth diary. And if my Uncle Ben makes a book of this one, I'm going to ask him to call it *Trigger Berg and the Sacred Pig.*

So far I haven't been photographed for the newspapers. Nor have I heard anything about a parade. But I mustn't get impatient.

(Later.) Tail Light just called up, asking me what the natives of China do when it rains.

"What?" says I curiously.

"Why," says he, "they let it rain."

THE END

AFTER FINISHING THE SACRED PIG DIARY, TRIGGER WROTE THIS LETTER TO HIS UNCLE BEN

Crocketville, Illinois,
November 6.

BENJAMIN BERG,
GROSSET & DUNLAP,
NEW YORK, N. Y.

Dear Uncle Ben:

As soon as you get my "Sacred Pig" diary made up into a book please send special copies to my chums, Slats, Friday, Tail Light and Randall Lewis. But if you get a letter from Betty Sharpe, hinting around for a free copy, send her an old almanac.

We're working on a new mystery now. And are we ever having fun! Gee! Did you ever hear of a Cockeyed Ghost? We know where there's one. It wears rubber boots, and Tail Light says he saw it sitting on a bee hive trimming its corns. We're going to capture it with a ghost-capturing machine that Friday has invented. I'm putting everything down in my fourth diary. And when it is complete, I hope you'll call the book "Trigger Berg and the Cockeyed Ghost."

Slats has a new wart on his left thumb and I have the stomach ache, having been foolish enough to eat eleven biscuits that Tail Light baked. It's a good thing that I don't have to start out tonight and discover something, like Columbus. I'd sink the ship.

I'll always remember that swell box of candy that you sent me. Friday told me to hint around to you to send me another one, but, of course, I wouldn't do that.

Your loving nephew,
TRIGGER BERG.

(PUBLISHER'S NOTE: THUS THE FOURTH BOOK OF THIS SERIES WILL BEAR THE TITLE, "TRIGGER BERG AND THE COCKEYED GHOST." AND IT'S COMING SOON!)

OUR CHATTER-BOX

WHEN I first started this department, now a regular feature of my books (this is Leo Edwards speaking), I wondered if boys and girls would care for it. But I couldn't resist the temptation to publish a few of the many fine chummy letters that I had received from my loyal young readers. And I'm happy to report to-day that "Our Chatter-Box" *is* widely read and enjoyed. Boys in Maine like to read published letters from boys in Texas. And having formed their own opinions of the almost countless characters in my books, readers in one section of the country like to know what readers in other sections think of these characters.

Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott, I find, are nation-wide favorites. Countless dogs, cats, birds, turtles, snakes, bicycles and what-not have been named after these young story-book heroes. Wherever a friendly gang gets together, it is common practice for the boys to take the names of Jerry, Scoop, Peg and so on. In time I trust that Trigger and his fine young pals will be just as popular. And for the still smaller readers, both boys and girls, we'll soon have Tuffy Bean. Dog stories, told humorously by fair-and-square little Tuffy himself! Two of the books have been written, *Tuffy Bean's Puppy Days* and *Tuffy Bean's One-Ring Circus.*

Mr. Salg (whose address, if you ever care to write to him, is Congers, New York) has filled these initial books, to be published in a very few months, with some of the finest pictures he has drawn. Pictures in every chapter! There's something to tell your younger brothers and sisters.

Since the introduction of "Our Chatter-Box" we have created various essential departments. There's the Freckled Goldfish Club, the School Club and the poem department. Yes, sir, boys

can write corking good poems. If you doubt it, read the poems in this issue. Each published poem earns for its young writer an autographed copy of this book. If *you* can write an accepted poem, you too will receive a free autographed copy of the particular book (it may be an Ott, Todd, Blake, Berg or Bean) in which the poem is published.

Writers of accepted letters do not receive awards, as we feel, in this case, that the publication of the selected letters is sufficient award in itself.

We are always in need of corking good letters. So, if you want your intended letter to be published, make it interesting.

You'll find my complete address at the conclusion of this "Chatter-Box."

And now let us see what some of the boys and girls have got to say.

LETTERS

"I AM now sixteen years old," writes Curtis Hays, 1507 West 8th St., Oklahoma City, Okla., "and still read the Trigger Berg, Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott books. I think myself there's no age limit to your books. What is the name of the Jerry Todd book after 'Editor-in-Grief?' Is it an Oak Island book? Does the 'American Boy' still publish any of your stories?"

I remember you, Curtis, as a boy who wrote an accepted poem. I'm now working on *Jerry Todd, Caveman,* the eleventh book of the Todd series, which will be published soon. Yes, it is an Oak Island story—and what a yarn! My big problem right now is to write my books fast enough for scheduled publication, which explains why several years have passed since I last sent a story to the American Boy. A magazine frequently holds a serial a year or two. And my publisher feels that my books shouldn't be thus held up.

"I received your photograph last Saturday," writes William Hadley, 19 Bailey St., Uxbridge, Mass., "and thank you very much for it. I'm going to have it framed. Some time send me a smaller picture, so I can show it to my chums, as I don't want to lug your big picture all over town."

Now that my publisher is charging boys and girls ten cents for a picture of my handsome (?) mug, I've worried for fear some of the enthusiastic young purchasers might feel that they got cheated. Bill, though, seems to be in a perfectly contented frame of mind, for which I am immeasurably grateful. Should any other young readers care to invest ten cents

in a picture of yours truly, please send the required postage stamps to Leo Edwards' Secretary, Grosset & Dunlap, 1140 Broadway, New York, N. Y. But for heaven's sake don't jump on me if you don't know what to do with the blamed thing after you get it.

"I like your books," writes Greta Hicks, 637 Central Ave., Beloit, Wis., "and would like to join the Freckled Goldfish Club. Did you ever live in Beloit? And do you know a girl named Betty Dobson? She said she knows you but I could hardly believe her."

Yes, Greta, Betty is a particular friend of mine. One year she and her brothers spent the whole summer at Lake Ripley, where I have a summer home. Beloit was my home for many years. In this book Trigger has used in his diary a short story that I wrote in Beloit.

"The library of our Freckled Goldfish Club is very small," writes Franklin Carl Massey, 3529 Frankford Ave., Philadelphia, Pa., "but small as it is we have three of your books in it—two Jerry Todds and one Trigger Berg. The rituals that you sent us are splendid."

Accompanying Frank's letter is a copy of a small amateur magazine that he publishes, called "The Pioneer." It contains aviation news, wit and humor, wise sayings and advertisements. As I glance through it I'm reminded of the amateur magazine that I published in Beloit, Wisconsin, for almost two years. We called the magazine "Boy Partners," and once we got out an issue of 32 pages. To-day, boys who possess copies of the old magazine treasure them highly.

"I think that 'Editor-in-Grief' is the funniest of the Jerry Todd books," writes Albert Morgan, 147-31 Hoover Ave., Jamaica, N. Y. "Red sure must have looked funny on top of the totem pole. My friend John Clark doesn't like your Blake books. I guess it's because he doesn't understand them. My mother told me to tell you that she wishes you would write more books, because when I'm reading one of your books I'm quiet. My father read *Jerry Todd, Pirate,* and he said it was very good. Boy, I sure was glad to see my name in *Andy Blake and the Pot of Gold!* I am sending in an order for one of your autographed pictures. I have a nice place on the wall for it. Our Goldfish Club is getting along fine. We started a new club, too, called The Secret and Mysterious Order of Humpty-Dumpty the Rejuvenated Egg."

Thanks, Al, for your continued interest in my books. I'm glad to learn that your

branch club is progressing nicely; and I'm further glad to learn that your pa enjoyed my "Pirate" book.

"I like to imagine that I am one of Jerry's gang," writes Robert Wright, 133 Dover St., Dayton, Ohio. "Please tell me the real names of Tutter, Ashton and Steam Corners. I have pictured you as a tall professor-like man, like Professor Pip and Stoner, with brown eyes and hair and enormous horn-rimmed eyeglasses. Or are you a short plump man with a bay window, gray hair around the edge of a shiny dome, sideburns and a goatee?"

Tut-tut! The idea of hinting around that I look like those goofy professors in the "Rose-Colored Cat" and "Freckled Goldfish" books! What *you* better do is to cough up a dime and invest it in one of my marvelous, gorgeous, stunning and-so-on-and-so-forth pictures. You'll be surprised! And to show you how anxious I am to sell you a picture (it costs us six cents to mail it! —so there's an added inducement, if you save stamps) I'm going to tell you what Wilbert Massman, 1436 Berteau Ave., Chicago, Ill., says about the picture that *he* received. "I certainly think a lot of that picture," writes Will, with his trusty fountain pen. "If you don't believe me, have some guy come to my house and try to take it away from me (he means the picture and not the house). You'll have to carry him back home, providing he isn't too big. Boy, that picture is the main attraction in my room (hip-hip-hurray!). I expected a snapshot, like the one I sent you. And when the postman handed me your package I almost broke the house down trying to get in, so I could open it (and again I'm constrained to add that he means the package and not the house)."

"When I read *Jerry Todd and the Talking Frog,*" writes Junior Schlegel, 140 E. College Ave., Kent, Ohio, "I laughed so hard that my mother thought I was cuckoo. The part that struck me so funny was where Scoop sold Mrs. Pederson a cake of Bubbles of Beauty. I've never read any books that I liked better than the Jerry Todds and Poppy Otts. I know the title of every book that you have written, in the order of publication. Mr. Steiner, our book dealer, lets us look the books over. Then, when we get the necessary money, we buy the books we want."

Which is a dandy little letter. And I'm only sorry that Junior's poem wasn't quite good enough for publication.

"Throughout the past year," writes Denny Gallagher, 1223 32nd Ave., San

Francisco, Calif., "I have become very much interested in your books. The Jerry Todd series has given me sparks of laughter and many chilly creeps, as Jerry and his chums had the utmost of fun in the vicinity of the small town of Tutter. In reading Poppy's books I have wanted to become a member of the Freckled Goldfish Club. Although I like Jerry's series the better of the two sets of books, they are all interesting and seem to be a toss-up to find which is the best. I'm not the only one who wants you to write more Todd and Ott books. I let a boy chum read my Todd books and he quickly wanted to organize a branch club. If possible will you offer us a name for such a club?"

And, of course, the requested name was provided when we sent Denny his membership card and button.

John Young, 12 years of age, writes from the Children's Heart Hospital, Falls Road, West Philadelphia, Pa.

"I have been here for the past six months and have to stay in bed all the time. So I read a lot. When I read about Jerry Todd and his chums it reminds me of the good times I had myself swimming, etc. Things look kind of bad for me now. But I haven't given up hope. And in conclusion please send me a Goldfish membership card and button."

If there's anything in particular that makes me happy it's when I get a letter like John's, and am thus made to realize that my books are not only bringing added fun into the lives of active boys but are further helping to brighten the days of boys who unfortunately are confined to their beds. Yes, then is when I feel that my job is really worth while after all. I never expect to write "literature." But I'm going to keep on writing books to brighten boys' lives.

"Going over to my old neighborhood," writes Bud Butler, 3618 Rokeby St., Chicago, Ill., "I met a former chum who was strutting around like a million-dollar 'whiffle hen.' He had just received his Freckled Goldfish button. I'm an old member who never received a button; so why not send me one, too."

I dare say there are other old members who never received buttons, as it was only about a year ago that we started using them. Any member new or old can secure a button by sending a two-cent stamp to headquarters. If you've lost your button, send for another.

"I used to think I didn't like 'I' books," writes Daniel Murphy, 837 Plymouth Ave., Fall River, Mass. "But I changed my mind when I started reading about Jerry Todd."

Also Dan gives a very interesting account of a Crackerjack club that he belongs to. And it's his intention, he says, to organize a Freckled Goldfish Club. Here's wishing you luck, Dan.

But instead of going on with the general letters I think I'll stop now and see what we have in the way of poems.

POEMS

FIRST on the list comes a nameless poem written by Louis Biderman, 2228 Amsterdam Ave., New York, N. Y.

I like the Jerry Todd books,
And the Andy blake books, too.
But the Poppy Otts and Trigger Bergs
Are my favorites 'tis true.

Whenever I see a book
Written by Leo Edwards,
That book is in my hands and read
Before I've gone bedwards.

I hope this poem is printed,
Though it may not be so clever.
And you shall see, Mr. Edwards,
That my next one will be better.

All right, Louis, that's a promise. Here's an autographed copy for you. Keep it and show it to your grandchildren when you get old.

The next poem, written by Wilbur Cooper, 12 years old, 1025 St. Ruble Ave. N. E., Canton, Ohio, finds a warm place in my heart. For it's the story of a boy's love for his mother.

My Mother

I love my mother as she loves me,
For she loves me so tenderly.
She forgives me when I'm bad,
And I'm always very glad.

If my mother should pass away,
I would be sorry every day.
For what would I do without my mother,
Whom I love far better than my brother?

You have the right spirit, Wilbur. And I'm glad that your little poem has earned for you an autographed copy of this book.

Here's a longer poem, written by Joe Morrison, 221 8th Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Jerry Todd is full of fun;
Red is the hungry one.
Once Red sat on a totem pole,
And after a storm there was just a hole.

The leader is Scoop Ellery;
The fighter is Peg Shaw;

And when Bid Stricker comes along
He gets a sock in the jaw.

After Red disappeared with the totem pole
Jerry was made Editor-in-Chief.
Then the complaints started coming in,
And he changed his title to Editor-in-Grief.

Which, I think, deserves an autographed book. And here it is, Joe.

Ralph Caso, 780 Lexington Ave., New York, N. Y., is the creator of the next masterpiece.

Jerry Todd is a story-book boy,
Who lives in Tutter, Illinois.
His bosom pal is Poppy Ott,
And they like each other an awful lot.

Red Meyers, Peg Shaw, Scoop Ellery,
Are also in the gang, you see.
Red is only a little runt.
Scoop Ellery is the "big grunt."

The other guy is a big yegg—
Of course you know that I mean Peg.
There's Henny Bibbler, and Rory, too,
When they're with the others there's plenty to do.

And, of course, Ralph gets an autographed book, too.

Harry Williams, 102-14 Van Wyck Blvd., Richmond Hill, N. Y., is the author of this one.

Where I'd Like to Live

There's a place where I would like to live—
To live there would bring joy, and some!
Why, anything I'd surely give
To live in Cambridge, Wisconsin.

You ask me why I'd like to?
Why you ought to know.
So I'd live near Leo Edwards,
And there I'd love to go.

I'd like to shake his hand warmly
And talk with him awhile.
And I'd like to see upon his face
A great big natural smile.

He'd tell me all about himself,
And how his work is done.
Yes, to live close to Leo Edwards
Surely must be fun.

Accompanying Harry's poem is a corking good letter. "Thanks for answering my questions," says he, "but don't you write terrible! (I admit it.) Yesterday I went up to Gertz—that's where I buy my books—to get 'Editor-in-Grief.' And I'll be

cow-kicked if the girl didn't tell me that the last copy had just been sold—which shows you how popular your books are around here. I bought instead your latest Andy Blake book. I think it's hot. I'm going to send to Grosset & Dunlap for one of your automobiled—I mean autographed pictures. By the way, did you hear about the big fight at the bakery? Yah, the rolls got fresh. And there was a holdup in my back yard, too. A pair of clothespins held up a pair of drawers. Here's a good joke:

Dick: 'What's opposite to in?'
Joe: 'Out.'
Dick: 'What's opposite to soft?'
Joe: 'Hard.'
Dick: 'What's opposite to good?'
Joe: 'Bad.'
Dick: 'What's opposite to woe?'
Joe: 'Giddyap.'

And now let us hurry on to the next poem, written by Dick Barry, 69-12 78 St., Ridgewood Sta., L. I., N. Y.

The Best of 'Em All

This is the declaration
By a reader versed in books,
Who cares not for the author's fame,
Or for his personal looks.

I've read great English classics,
Both in and out of school.
I've read enough good literature
To drown a healthy mule.

I like Poe and Lincoln,
O. Henry and Charles Faul.
But I think Leo Edwards
Is the best one of them all.

I've read books by Burt L. Standish,
Books both dry and odd.
But for a story-book hero
I'll stick to Jerry Todd.

And here's another case where the young poet's letter is just as interesting as his poem. But for want of space I'll have to pass it up.

This next poem I consider a little gem. It was written by Jack Bowley, 736 Brunswick St., San Francisco, Calif.

When Rory Laughs

When you come to Tutter
Something funny you will see,
If you watch Rory laughing,
Going 'e, 'e, 'e.

If you want to see something funny—
The funniest you ever saw,
Just watch Rory laughing,
Going 'aw, 'aw, 'aw.

If Rory should fall and skin his chin,
And run home to his ma.

I bet that's one time he
  won't be
  Laughing 'aw, 'aw, 'aw.

When he goes out on the
  street,
  The people they all roar.
For that bloomin' Rory's
  laughing,
  Going 'oar, 'oar, 'oar.

And here's Jack's letter: "Though I live in a city I have some baby chicks. One of them I call Tail Light because it has a long tail that sticks up in the air. Also this chick is the smallest of the bunch."

I stare in amazement at the beautiful art work that accompanies the next poem, written by Paul Glenister, 6432 S. California Ave., Chicago, Ill. Here indeed is a natural-born artist. The three pictures sent to me are taken from the colored jackets of the "Elephant," "Tittering Totem" and "Editor-in-Grief" books. And now let's see what kind of a poet he is.

Reading of Jerry Todd
  And Poppy Ott
Has made our class
  A happy lot.

For when tasks
  Assigned are done,
We turn to these books
  To have some fun.

Now school hours
  Are indeed a pleasure
When mixed with books
  Like "Oak Island Treasure."

They make us laugh,
  They thrill and thrill,
They make a zero mark
  Fail to give a chill.

Then hip-hip-hurray!
  For Jerry and his chums.
O Lord, keep us patient
  Till their new venture
    comes.

Brian King, 36 Fairfield St., Springfield, Mass., is the author of the next poem.

The Tale of the Tailless Elephant

Red Meyers had an uncle
  Who had sailed the seven
    seas.
He sent poor Red an elephant
  And forty crates of fleas.

Poor Red was pleased with
    the unusual gift.
  It would be a lot of fun
To feed Bingo ripe bananas,
  And shade him from the
    sun.

One day a queer thing happened,
  It gave the boys a fright.
Their elephant had lost his
    tail,
  Which vanished in the
    night.

They searched and searched
    most everywhere,
  But could not place their
    loss.
So then the gang decided
  They'd have to buy a
    "hoss."

But the mystery it vanished
And the problem reached
an end.
I liked the book so very well
This poem I had to send.

So if you'd solve the problem,
Or you want to have some
fun,
Just buy this book I've written about,
For then my work is done.

Brian mentions, too, in his letter that he'll be glad to exchange letters with other Jerry Todd fans. Which prompts me to call your attention to the fact that we're now publishing the complete addresses of all contributors. This makes it easy for boys who enjoy writing letters to prepare a list of correspondents.

Oh, gee! I wish I could use all of the poems in the pile on my desk. But I'll have to stop here, hoping that they'll appear in the next "Chatter-Box."

SCHOOL CLUB

WHEN we organized this new club in January, announcement was made that at the end of the year the names of all members would be "put into the hat," and ten names drawn at random. Thus ten of the members would receive free autographed copies of this book. Also it was promised that the names of all members would be published. And it was further promised that the second year twenty names would be drawn. Names once drawn are not included in later drawings.

Just as my Jerry Todd, Poppy Ott and Trigger Berg books are written primarily to fill the lives of boys and girls with clean, natural fun, so also would I like to have my young readers share this book fun of theirs with others, which can be done individually if you will prevail upon your teacher to read one of my Ott, Todd or Berg books aloud. That will be fun for the whole room. Do you get my point? I might mention, too, that these books are written to read aloud.

If your teacher, through your personal efforts, reads one of my books to the school, you automatically become a member of our "School Club," and should so notify me. Your name will then be included in the next published group, in the fourth Trigger Berg book, at which time we also will publish the names of the twenty prize winners. Here are the names of the first ten prize winners and also the complete membership to date. I might add that these names were drawn fairly by a Grosset and Dunlap representative on December 2, 1930. A star (*)

precedes the names of the prize winners.

*Doris Doubler, River Road, Brecksville, Ohio.

*Fred Loco, 1140 Cherry St., Winnetka, Ill.

*Watson Fulks, Route 2, Strong, Ark.

*Jack Reed, 304 Arthur St., Liberty, Mo.

*Shirley Bloch, 2129 Coney Island Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

*Martin Betley, 5053 N. Oak Park Ave., Chicago, Ill.

*Richard Barry, 69-12 Griffith Ave., Ridgewood Sta., L. I., N. Y.

*George Ray, Jr., 1458 South Gordon St., Atlanta, Ga.

*Bob Hopson, 712 W. College Ave., Waukesha, Wis.

*Ralph John Bentson, 449 Downer Place, Aurora, Ill.

Len Rubin, 5821 Larchwood Ave., Philadelphia, Pa.

John Marx, 3408 Hiland Blvd., Milwaukee, Wis.

Mark Hopkins, Jr., 624 N. Warren St., Helena, Mont.

Robert C. Lindeman, 200 Broadway, Hicksville, L. I., N. Y.

Sidney Younkman, 2016 N. Bond St., Saginaw, Mich.

Edward Whitty, 253 Buffirtog St., Fall River, Mass.

Herbert Taub, 1256 Liberty St., Franklin, Pa.

Louis Michini, 700 N. Union St., Wilmington, Del.

Junior Schlegel, 140 College Ave., Kent, Ohio.

Arthur Bobroff, 45 Graham Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

H. Hattaway, 714 Dover Rd., Irving Park, Greensboro, N. C.

Willard Carpenter, 150-13 Hoover Ave., Jamaica, N. Y.

William Hadley, 14 Bailey St., Uxbridge, Mass.

Wm. Fullerton, 3254 W. 61 Pl., Chicago, Ill.

Buxton Hobbes, 3322 Demere St., Jacksonville, Fla.

Ralph Mohat, 538 N. Prospect St., Marion, Ohio.

Irving Dunn, 2865 University Ave., Bronx, New York, N. Y.

Donald Pitman, 20 Dagobert St., Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

William H. Forst, 41 W. 86 St., New York, N. Y.

Edward Maisel, 162 Claremont Ave., Buffalo, N. Y.

Norman Salshutz, 70 Hill St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Jimmy Manning, 13 N. Highland Ave., Baltimore, Md.

Shirley Blumenthal, 240 Seymour Ave., Newark, N. J.

Teddy R. Fletcher, 27 Darwin Ave., Hastings-on-Hudson, N. Y.

Henry Nelson, 78 Sterling Ave., Providence, R. I.

Kenneth Cook, 1668 Juneuay Terr., Chicago, Ill.

Remember, the next group of names will appear in the fourth Trigger Berg book. At that time twenty names will be drawn. You probably can win one of these free autographed books if you take one of your Todds, Otts or Bergs to school and have the teacher read it aloud.

MORE LETTERS

"I HAVE read your Jerry Todd books for years," writes Jack Damon, 445 W. High St., Alliance, Ohio. "The first was *Jerry Todd and the Purring Egg*. I have all of the Todd books except *Jerry Todd, Editor-in-Grief*. I have one Ott book. I get a big kick out of these books. My father, mother and sister all read them. By the way, couldn't you write a Todd book involving chemistry?"

That's a suggestion.

"My grandson," writes Mrs. J. D. Ambrose, Corsicana, Texas, "is a great admirer of Jerry Todd, Poppy Ott and their gang and so wants to join your Freckled Goldfish Club. His name is Joseph Ambrose Edens and he lives in this city at 1004 W. 3rd Ave."

Thank you, Mrs. Ambrose. I'm glad you're not one of those old-fashioned grandmothers, with the idea that nothing outside of the "Pilgrim's Progress" is good enough for the younger generation to read. I recall one little chap who was in tears because his grandmother wouldn't let him read about Jerry Todd. But he finally convinced her, with my help, that Jerry was really worth while after all.

The next communication is a card, written by Joseph Callaghan, 353 West Merrick Rd., Freeport, L. I., N. Y. Also in the same mail I received a similar card from Fred T. Bean, who, too, lives on West Merrick Road. Joe writes: "Have you got freckles? Are you gawky and have you got red hair? Are your legs long and can you take big steps? I like your books and want to join the Freckled Goldfish Club."

And why should I waste time telling this bird what I look like when he can get a picture (more advertising!) of me for the paltry sum of ten cents?

"I have read most all of your books," writes Jimmy Webster, 108 Jerusalem Ave., Hicksville, L. I., N. Y. "The one I like best is where the mummy scares the people. I'm 12 years old and can do a lot of work on the farm. I feed chickens, calves, pigs and horses. I like best feeding horses and like least feeding pigs. I have a flower garden of my own. Here are some questions I'd like to ask you: Do you like to feed pigs? Did you ever have a horse step on your foot? Don't you think 300 chickens are too much for one boy to feed?"

Sure thing, I've fed pigs. One time I forgot to lock the gate, and getting out they ran all over the farm. No, I never had a horse step on me. 300 chickens are too many when they're big enough to eat.

FRECKLED GOLDFISH

NOT long ago we organized a club called the Secret and Mysterious Order of the Freckled Goldfish—the club getting its name from the Ott book of that title. To-day we have more than 7,000 members.

The club is purely a "fun" proposition. There are no dues (except as required in local Chapters); and the responsibilities are light. If you have a kindly feeling toward Poppy, Jerry, Andy and Trigger, you are eligible to join.

Mr. Bert Salg, the popular illustrator of these books, designed the membership card, which contains a comical picture of Poppy's Freckled Goldfish, together with the general rules and regulations —all printed on the card.

Any boy can join who wants to. It will cost you four cents in stamps—four one-cent stamps or two two-cent stamps. One red stamp will pay the postage on your membership card and button; the other red stamp will partly cover the cost of the envelope, card and button.

In applying for membership please observe these simple rules:

(1) Print your name plainly.

(2) Supply your complete printed address.

(3) Give your age.

(4) Enclose two two-cent stamps—or four one-cent stamps.

(5) Address your letter to:

Leo Edwards,
Cambridge,
Wisconsin.

LOCAL CHAPTERS

WE have a printed ritual which any boy who wants to start a Freckled Goldfish Club in his own neighborhood can't afford to be without. This booklet tells how to organize the club, how to conduct meetings, how to transact all club business, and, probably most important of all, how to initiate candidates.

Three chief officers will be required to put on the initiation, which can be given in any boy's home, so, unless each officer is provided with a booklet much memorizing will have to be done. The best plan is to have three booklets to a lodge. These may be secured (at cost) at six cents each (three two-cent stamps) or three for sixteen cents (eight two-cent stamps).

Address all orders to:

Leo Edwards,
Cambridge,
Wisconsin.

CLUB NEWS

NOT only do we have a large general membership in our national club, but hundreds of boys and girls have organized branch clubs.

And every day we get reports of meetings. The young members of these clubs have a lot of fun; they're learning things, too, that will be helpful to them when they grow up. For practically all men and women belong to societies of some kind or other.

"There are exactly ten boys in my club," writes organizer Franklin C. Massey, 3529 Frankford Ave., Philadelphia, Pa. "I am the temporary treasurer. We have not yet elected our regular officers. This coming Saturday the club is going on a hike. I hope it doesn't rain."

"Until I showed them my membership card and button," writes Kenneth Schellenberg, 118 Lorraine Ave., Buffalo, N. Y., "the kids around here wouldn't believe that there was such a club. Now they are all anxious to join. So please send me the necessary booklets telling how to organize a branch club, how to initiate candidates, and so on. Rest assured that there won't be any smart alecks or tough guys in our club. No, sir! Just guys my size. I have picked out the second and third officers for initiating candidates."

And here's an enthusiastic letter from Junior Schlegel, 140 College Ave., Kent, Ohio.

"Oh, boy! The other night we had a grand meeting. We bought a couple of goldfish and a bowl and had it sitting on a table near the door of our pool. Freckled Fin (Glenn Reblen) ran into the bowl accidentally and the poor goldfish had their first fall. The bowl was broken, so we had to put the goldfish in another bowl my mother gave us. Did we ever laugh!"

"I would like to start a club out here," writes Paul Badgley, 123 Chapel St., Fayetteville, N. Y. "I belong to the national club—my number is 5953. I don't think I'll ever have a big club, as it's easier to handle a small club. And I wouldn't want my club to go to pieces."

Having received his own membership card, Herbert J. Rockwell, 5812 Trinity Place, W. Philadelphia, Pa., submits the names of John Emmett Hennessy, Jr., and Joseph Edger. Later Joe reported as follows:

"We expect to have a pretty lively chapter and will keep you posted as to our meetings and new members."

Here's a longer report from the secretary of the Pioneer Goldfish Club of Milwaukee.

"The meeting (our 16th) was called to order at 7:30 P. M. Resolved that we should have ice cream this meeting. Dues were then collected. Resolved that Gordon, Randall, Bud and Jack should be on initiation committee. Gordon president. Resolved that meeting should

be adjourned. After the meeting Edward Hahn got the ice cream. We then listened to Randall who read a ghost story in the dark, while Norman handed around different things that Randall read about, such as brains, gallstones, veins, eyes, hair, teeth and skin, which we all had to touch. After that we told a few ghost stories during which we were all scared by a door slam which was made by the family living next door.''

Here is a later report on the same club:

''The meeting (our 17th) was called to order at 7:30 P. M. Resolved that we set aside one meeting of the month in order to have entertainment. Resolved that we shall have a raffle next time, and that Bud shall pull the tickets. Dues were then collected. Initiation of George Zurstadt followed. We then played games and the meeting was adjourned.''

It so happens that George, who reported on these meetings, was the one initiated, and I sure wish he'd told us more about it. For I happen to know the members of this club, and they sure are a peppy bunch. Last spring I attended one of their meetings. A great deal of the credit for this well-handled organization is due Norman Wengert, 1019 Grant Blvd., Milwaukee, Wis. George lives at 909 38 St.

''Our branch club has started and is a great success,'' writes Irvin Weseman, 817 Maryland Ave., Pittsburgh, Pa. ''We have five members and are expecting three more. Another member, whom we call Far Fin, is our representative in Greece. We have a library of fifty books, not including magazines and non-fiction books. We write our own club paper and many of the members' mothers subscribe to this paper. We are surely building up our treasury fast.''

Irvin concludes with this appropriate little poem:

A Freckled Goldfish pool was started
In our district, and was chartered.
A pool was found one day,
And then things began to sway.
Elections and initiations
Came up to our expectations.

Attached to the next report is a one-page club newspaper, entitled the Weekly Fish Bowl. It certainly is a newsy little sheet, and reflects credit on the enterprising branch club that got it out. I'd like to correct one of the news items. It states that we have over 2,000 members in our national club. As a matter of fact we have over 7,000 at the time this book goes to press. By the time it is

placed on sale we'll probably have 8,000 or 9,000 members.

"We are writing to tell you about our branch club," reports Joe Sorrentino, 1461 76 St., Brooklyn, N. Y. "Attached is a copy of our weekly paper. Will you kindly have three pennants made for us; we'll be glad to pay for them."

We try very hard to cooperate with the different club managers. But there are some things we cannot do, lacking the time and ability. And in this case we had to tell Joe that he'd have to make his own pennants. And why not? He knows as much about it as us. And if he and his chums do the work, naturally the pennants will mean more to them. I recall one pennant that was sent to me, made by a club down east. And it was a corking good pennant, too. In the upper half was the name of the city. And in the lower half was a painting of a Freckled Goldfish. My boy, who is at college, wanted the pennant to put up in his room.

"Our club has not been going on during the summer," reports Jack Herb, 3400 Allendale St., Pittsburgh, Pa., "but we have it going at full swing now. Our club is the only boys' club in our 'neck of the woods' that has met with success. We organized more than a year ago."

"Here's the report of our first meeting," writes Len Turovlin, Chicago, Ill. "Seymour brought peanuts and I brought lemonade. When we came in Daniel asked us what we were to do. Jerome suggested voting. Which we did. I was elected president; Jerome Bernstien vice-president; Junior Morin treasurer; Daniel Golman secretary; Morris Bernstien vice-treasurer and Seymour Snitowsky sergeant-at-arms. That meeting came out fine, but one of the members didn't behave himself, so we exiled him for two weeks. We have organized a secret service in our club, and we also have a library. Junior is librarian."

"I think it would be a good idea if different chapters could communicate with each other," suggests one of our leading organizers, Bill Hopwood, Primos, Pa.

Very well, Bill. There's plenty of addresses in this "Chatter-Box." So get busy.

"This summer," reports Jack Bush, 5023 Springfield Ave., Philadelphia, Pa., "I organized a club called the Tittering Totem Club. We made a totem pole with all kinds of spooky faces all over it. By fixing it up with a rubber bulb we could make it titter, too. One night at ten o'clock a boy was walking along our street. We squeezed the rubber bulb. The kid turned around, took a squint at the faces, and ran for

home at sixty miles an hour.''

''I'm sorry I didn't write to you sooner,'' reports Jerry Donovan, 1603 S. Quincy, Tulsa, Okla. ''Boy, our club is coming along swell. I was elected Gold Fin, though one of the youngest boys. We have some fine members. We are going to try and have a football team, so would you please send us the official Freckled Goldfish colors? Enclosed is a snapshot of myself. I bet I have more freckles than Red Meyers or even the Freckled Goldfish.''

Just at present we haven't decided on official colors for our club. We'll take that up later on. And many thanks for the picture, Jerry. You certainly are a snappy looking kid.

That's all for this time. Write to me often, fellows. Keep me posted on your club activities. And call on me for help whenever you need it. We're all buddies, you know.

This Isn't All!

Would you like to know what became of the good friends you have made in this book?

Would you like to read other stories continuing their adventures and experiences, or other books quite as entertaining by the same author?

On the *reverse side* of the wrapper which comes with this book, you will find a wonderful list of stories which you can buy at the same store where you got this book.

Don't throw away the Wrapper

Use it as a handy catalog of the books you want some day to have. But in case you do mislay it, write to the Publishers for a complete catalog.

BOOKS BY LEO EDWARDS

Illustrated. Every Volume Complete in Itself.

Hundreds of thousands of boys who laughed until their sides ached over the weird and wonderful adventures of Jerry Todd and his gang demanded that Leo Edwards, the author, give them more books with belt-bursting laughs and creepy shivers. So he took Poppy Ott, Jerry Todd's bosom chum and created the Poppy Ott series. Now there are two more series, The Andy Blake and the Trigger Berg—and if such a thing is possible—they are even more full of fun and excitement than the Jerry Todds.

THE JERRY TODD BOOKS

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JERRY TODD AND THE OAK ISLAND TREASURE
JERRY TODD AND THE WALTZING HEN
JERRY TODD AND THE TALKING FROG
JERRY TODD AND THE PURRING EGG
JERRY TODD IN THE WHISPERING CAVE
JERRY TODD, PIRATE
JERRY TODD AND THE BOB-TAILED ELEPHANT
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POPPY OTT AND THE GALLOPING SNAIL
POPPY OTT'S PEDIGREED PICKLES
POPPY OTT AND THE FRECKLED GOLDFISH
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POPPY OTT AND THE PRANCING PANCAKE

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ANDY BLAKE AND THE POT OF GOLD

THE TRIGGER BERG BOOKS

TRIGGER BERG AND THE TREASURE TREE
TRIGGER BERG AND 700 MOUSETRAPS
TRIGGER BERG AND THE SACRED PIG

THE TUFFY BEAN BOOKS

TUFFY BEAN'S PUPPY DAYS
TUFFY BEAN'S ONE RING CIRCUS
TUFFY BEAN AT FUNNY-BONE FARM
TUFFY BEAN AND THE LOST FORTUNE

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